

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



131 896

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Loren Carroll

CONVERSATION,
PLEASE

A CLINIC FOR TALKERS

DRAWINGS BY

Ellen Hendrixson

THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
INDIANAPOLIS *Publishers* NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1939, BY LOREN CARROLL

FIRST EDITION

NOTE—Some of the material in these chapters appeared in *ESQUIRE* and *CORONET*, and is published with their permission.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PRINTED AND BOUND BY
BRAUNWORTH & CO., INC.
BUILDERS OF BOOKS
BRIDGEPORT, CONN.

CONTENTS

I	WHY A CONVERSATION CLINIC?	9
II	BEHIND THE GARGOYLES	18
III	CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS	27
IV	THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION	41
V	THOSE WHO KNOW HOW	67
VI	WALLFLOWERS	80
VII	THE QUEEN PASSED THE SUGAR	92
VIII	BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE	99
IX	THE PIG'S TAIL AND OTHER MATTERS	114
X	MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY	120
XI	THREE SPADES AND BACH FUGUES	137
XII	THE ART OF SAYING GOOD-BY	143
XIII	MOTH-BALL VOCABULARY	152
XIV	MORTAL SINS	159
XV	VENIAL SINS	164
XVI	TARNISHED GOLD	169

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Method is not less requisite in ordinary conversation than in writing, provided a man would talk to make himself understood.

—ADDISON

The Wisdom of Conversation ought not to be over much affected, but much less despised; for it hath not only an honour in itself, but an influence also in business and government.

—FRANCIS BACON

CHAPTER ONE

WHY A CONVERSATION CLINIC?

CONVERSATION IS THE GREATEST WEAPON WE POSSESS IN OUR skirmish with the world. By our speech we attract others or repel them. We use it to buy and sell, woo and win, cajole others into doing our bidding. We use it for more sinister purposes, too, but let that pass.

Most of us devote more time to talking than to any other activity. It brings us more pleasure than dancing, golfing, going to the movies, cutting coupons, eating mango salad. Conversation is not only a pleasure in itself but it keeps the memory of other pleasures alive. We would enjoy few activities if we were forbidden to talk about them afterward.

The number of words we speak every day runs up to a fabulous total. On an average most of us spout twenty-five or thirty thousand. On certain days, of course, we talk less than others. Take a woman about to ask her husband for a mink coat. Her output is likely to sink as low as 5,000 a day till her husband says, "My dear, what's the matter?" When he catches on, it reminds him of the time he didn't speak a word from breakfast till the hour he had fixed to ask the boss for a raise.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

But a mink on the back or a raise in the pocket is likely to raise the daily total as high as 50,000 words. Other occasions that may lift the word output to a 50,000 level are operations, cocktail parties, trips to a psychoanalyst, a scandal in the neighborhood.

Again, occupations and religious affiliations have something to do with the daily wordage. Quakers talk less than members of Ethical Societies. (Try talking about ethics and see what a fancy total you can run up.) Night watchmen talk less than stenographers. And the most garrulous stenographer talks less than the woman who sits in a department-store information booth: "Dog collars, madam, are seventh floor west, near the guppies." . . . "What was it you wanted, sir? . . . *What?* . . . No, there's nothing like that in the store!"

Just as individuals fluctuate, so does the nation. A chart showing country-wide production would doubtless reveal that a week of rain, Eat-an-Apple-Week, Be-Kind-to-Babies-Week cuts the American output to 10,000 words a day per capita. A week of rain, as the industrial scientists have discovered, slows down everything. And if you have ever tried eating apples or being kind to babies for a whole week, you know how this can cut down the energies. But on the other side of the picture, the American total is probably quintupled during an election campaign or the football season. What the national total is after Hitler makes a speech or a movie star threatens to read her diary in court, only God and Dr. Gallup could tell.

WHY A CONVERSATION CLINIC?

At all events we spend an incredible part of our energy in conversation. If it is so important, why do we pay so little attention to it? Why are we willing to pay good money to learn golf, bridge, archery and beadwork, yet willing to let our conversation go hang?

Many of us spend a great deal of time trying to "improve our minds." This is all very well, but what about improving our conversation at the same time? New ideas popping out of soggy, graceless conversation are like top-notch dinners served on county-jail china.

Some of us set up economic and social progress as our chief purpose in life. Very well, but what about remembering this: our success depends on our relations with other human beings and our relations with other human beings depend on conversation.

For most of us, conversation is our only means of self-expression. We actually perform certain futile acts such as climbing the Bunker Hill monument and swimming three hundred feet under water in order to boast about them later. Midway in some strenuous experience we often catch our minds forming the words that will communicate the experience to wife, husband or friend. Sometimes we catch ourselves taking note of some trivial episode, much too trivial for general conversation, in order to tell it to one particular friend who will savor it. This is the creative instinct at work in us.

Fundamentally, conversation is an explosion of the ego. But unlike coal mines and gas tanks, which have been

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

known to explode in the dead of night, the ego must have an audience. Thus we are always in the market for good listeners.

The ego does not explode with the same force in conversation as it does, for instance, in committing murder or falling in love. But whereas most of us go through life without committing murder and most of us fall in love at rarish intervals, we all of us talk every chance we get.

Talking is a perfectly natural impulse, a perfectly legitimate way for the ego to work off excess steam. But if we are going to get the full good out of it, it should be done properly. If we are going to snare others into listening to us, we ought to give them a good time, too. Unlike tiger hunting or diplomacy, conversation is a game where fair play pays good dividends.

Conversation is one of the most important elements in life. It is more important than our looks, our clothes, the size of our muscles, our sex appeal. We do all sorts of things about our looks even unto plastic surgery. We select our clothes with care (even to produce an effect of *not* selecting our clothes with care). We exercise our muscles hoping to look like Sandow. We ape Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in our struggle for sex appeal. But we do nothing about our conversation.

Because we possess the gift of speech most of us think we know everything there is to be known about conversation. We merely open the mouth and think the matter will take care of itself.

WHY A CONVERSATION CLINIC?

It doesn't. That is why parties are swarming with bores, why corporations save money by installing dictaphones, why salesmen see doors slammed in their faces, why bridge is a common vice, why the most careful of us sometimes see our friends looking like the Dying Gladiator.

The most careful of us are usually shameless just after some big moment in our lives. The birth of little Elmer, an operation for adenoids ("My dear, I thought I was *smothering* when they put that thing over my nose."), a trip to Tahiti, a win in the lottery, imprisonment in an elevator between the thirty-third and thirty-fourth floors—any of these, we think, gives us the right to spill out fifteen or twenty thousand words right on the spot.

To think we understand conversation because we possess the gift of speech is as silly as to think we could construct an angel cake because the wedding loot included one of those pronged tins, or we could play Brahms's *Waltz in A Major* because Uncle Abel left us a violin.

No, conversation does not take care of itself. It requires thought and technique. Hence this book—a conversation clinic. Without getting grim about it, we will ask ourselves a few questions. Just why is conversation important? What should go into it? What should be left out? What makes a bad conversationalist? Why do so many people boggle it? Are there any rules to the game? Is there any difference between business and social conversation?

If we can answer these questions we can perhaps make our tongue-wagging hours a little happier. Not only hap-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

pier but more profitable. The good conversationalist (not merely the glib chatterbox) is usually successful in personal and business relationships. When it comes to making friends and keeping them, getting jobs, selling things, he knows how to make words count.

So our clinic will consider conversation as a social weapon and examine a technique for improving it.

This is the positive side of the clinic. There is also a negative side. Throughout the book you'll probably recognize boners and the kind of people who make them. One type to be examined fully with all his works and pomps is the bore. There are two good reasons for putting the bore under a microscope. In the first place we need to strengthen our defenses against him. In the second, most of us have a few drops of bore blood in our veins and it behooves us to keep it under control.

At first glance it would seem that the likely candidates for a conversation clinic would be the uneducated, the inarticulate, the socially delinquent. But this is not the case. The humbler breeds of mankind often acquit themselves admirably in conversation. Their speech fits their personalities. Their blunders, because they seem natural and inevitable, are easily forgiven.

It is the educated, the clever, the intelligent, who make a mess of conversation.

The reason is not far to seek. The simple man with simple ideas and prejudices, with an uncomplicated personality,



"Oh, but I'm boring you."

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

expresses himself with a minimum of difficulty. The superior man with richer thoughts, a more richly inflected personality, finds self-expression no easy problem. What's more, he rarely faces the fact that conversation *is* a problem. *His* blunders stand out like an albino in the Congo.

Whether this book has anything for you depends on how you answer these questions:

DO YOU

1. Study the wallpaper or your fingernails when others are talking?
2. Spatter your conversation with eccentric words or with foreign words and phrases?
3. Tell long anecdotes?
4. Whisper at concerts?
5. Say, "Oh, but I'm boring you!"
6. Tell the plots of movies, plays, novels?
7. Muscle in when others have the floor?
8. Say, "You understand what I mean?"

If you don't do any of these things or commit kindred faults, if your best friend has never jumped to his feet muttering, "Was that the phone?" during your story about Aunt Hortense and the naked burglar, if the hostess has never pounced on one of your commas with, "Oh, *do* have another mutton chop!"—then this book is not for you. You are undoubtedly a brilliant conversationalist and reading it will only make you self-conscious about your virtues.

On the other hand, if some of your best stories fall flat,

WHY A CONVERSATION CLINIC?

if you wonder why the Joneses didn't telephone, if you take ten minutes to say good-by, or if you punctuate your talk and the talk of others with, "Oh, that reminds me . . ." then this *is* for you. No harm will come to you if you stay on to the end of this conversation clinic.

CHAPTER TWO

BEHIND THE GARGOYLES

THIS IS A SHORT CHAPTER BUT THE MOST VITAL IN THE book. Unless we get the first principles of conversation fixed in our minds, we shall never learn to exploit it to the full.

What are the aims of conversation? In general, they are two:

1. To make it express our own personality.
2. To make it an instrument for improving our relations with others.

The first is not so simple as it sounds. How often have we heard remarks like these: "I thought Jimmy was a smart aleck when I first met him." . . . "It took me months to see that Harry is a swell person." . . . "I got Jenny all wrong, I thought she was a wretched little snob."

These are ways of saying that Jimmy, Harry and Jenny are inept conversationalists. They use words, not to project their own personalities but to create unfavorable impressions.

The good conversationalist has wits enough not to slander himself. He talks to make himself understood, not misunderstood. His conversation is natural but he does not

BEHIND THE GARGOYLES

necessarily say the first thing that pops into his head. He has too much sense to simulate knowledge he does not possess. He expresses his own opinions, not other men's. He uses words that come natural to him, not phrases pilfered from others.

He has the courage to avow his prejudices. If he dislikes in-a-door beds and strawberry shortcake he does not pretend he read in a book "by a scientist" that one gives you lumbago and the other housemaid's knee. If he thinks ash trays pinched from restaurants are good household decorations he does not pretend he found this recommended in the catechism. He simply has his prejudices.

Knowing that the shrewdest people make naïve remarks, he tosses off his full quota without shame. If he happens to be a man who cannot catch onto women and their wiles, he is not at all confounded when his observations are considered naïve. It never seems to do him any harm. Other men don't mind, and as for women, they seem to flock to gullible men. It probably gives them a greater sense of security.

From time to time the good conversationalist is inconsistent. When trapped, he admits it, perhaps quoting Emerson's remark, "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

The good conversationalist does the best he can with the sense of humor God gave him. He does not belong to the "I don't know what I'd do if it weren't for my sense of humor" school of thought because he knows that in a per-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

sonal crisis most of us lose our sense of humor in less time than it takes to split an infinitive. A sense of humor usually has to be cultivated. He feels he has done a good job if he learns to laugh at his own foibles.

This is the basic character of a good conversationalist. But it is subject to modification. The first modification comes in adjustment to other people.

Few of us are hermits by nature. We fear loneliness and to avoid it we are willing to pay a heavy price in compromise and inconvenience. In our hours of desolation we instinctively seek out another human being who will offer us sympathy and support. "I don't want any sympathy," we say. We mean—let's be honest with ourselves—that we *do* want sympathy, subtly expressed.

We like people who help us to think well of ourselves. We like those who make us feel stronger, cleverer than we are. We seek their company. We know that friendship is a reciprocal affair and unless we give something in return, it withers and dies. Like the very devil we shun those who expose our weaknesses, who hold us up to scorn, who make biting remarks, who constantly scatter gloom.

The good conversationalist knows all this. He knows his success in the world depends in large measure on other human beings. For the good of his own soul, to say nothing of such mundane matters as social and business relations, he must make friends and, having made them, hold them.

This is the time to point out, perhaps, that there is a

BEHIND THE GARGOYLES

difference between conversation with friends and conversation with strangers.

Our friends know a great deal about our character, purposes, abilities, moods. Whatever we say fits into a general background. We need not, therefore, be careful about the impression we are creating. If we make a ribald remark, our friends will not conclude we have a low pornographic mind. If we indulge in a bit of silliness they will not set us down for a buffoon.

But with strangers we must proceed on different lines. One single flippant remark might get us a reputation for being a cheap cynic. One bookish allusion in a very unbookish conversation might convince the others they are harboring a show-off. One burst of inopportune laughter might make an enemy.

Consider the experience of a young man who would willingly put on sackcloth and ashes to serve as Exhibit A in this matter of inopportune laughter. At a luncheon he noticed that a woman across the table was getting confused between "llama" and "lama." The young man thought this was funny and let out a guffaw. The woman reddened and changed the subject.

A few weeks later Exhibit A, representative of a textile firm, went to a large hotel hoping to place an order for brocades running into thousands of dollars. And there was the woman of the luncheon party enthroned like an empress behind one of those half-acre desks laden with telephones and push buttons. She was manager of the

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

hotel. The man made his offer and the woman made her answer. The answer was wrapped up in north wind and tied with icicles.

All this was petty of the woman, you might say, and quite rightly. She admitted it herself when a friend intervened. "He's a decent young fellow," said the friend. "You have a completely wrong idea of him."

The woman answered, "He behaved like a smug, snide little smart aleck. And I behaved like a child. If he ever comes around again I'll be specially nice to him. Unfortunately this order is placed."

The order had gone to a dull old buzzard who didn't know the difference between a "llama" and a "lama" but did know enough not to laugh at the wrong time.

All this is by way of saying that strangers, unlike friends, make deductions about us as they go along and all too quickly they hug their first impressions to their bosoms. So, if we have any discretion, we will maintain a suitable simplicity of manner with strangers and refrain from showing the gargoyles of our character till we are sure of an appreciative audience.

Whether with friends or with strangers we ought to be quick to perceive the moods of others. We need not be expert psychologists to know that people can shift their moods very often in the course of a day. We ought to keep our ears and eyes open for prevailing moods. You don't talk about your new Packard to the man who has just lost his job. You don't tell jokes about cremation to a

BEHIND THE GARGOYLES

man facing a dangerous operation. And you don't peddle the details about your gallstones at a bride's shower or a groom's bachelor dinner.

To be a good conversationalist whether in a group or with one person you should know when to introduce a tone of levity, when to keep it serious, when nerves are frayed, when boisterousness is acceptable and so on. You should never rub fur the wrong way. Perceiving the moods of others—and let us repeat, it takes no more than a pair of good ears and eyes—is one of the keys to successful conversation.

Does this mean we should always accept the moods of others? By no means! We cannot sob away a whole morning with the dowager who wants to tell us how much Towser's death has meant to her and how Roosevelt is taking the bread right out of her mouth. No more can we laugh away the afternoon with the washerwoman who appears with a ripe anthology of radio jokes, determined to spill them all.

The main thing is to *perceive* the moods of others and then defer to them or depart from them with full determination.

Whether you talk or whether you listen, you must play a definite role in conversation. You must make people feel at ease. Every person present must be included in the talk. Sometimes a roundup glance is sufficient. Sometimes the shy must be encouraged to talk. If the encouragement only serves to make them more shy, they must be let alone.

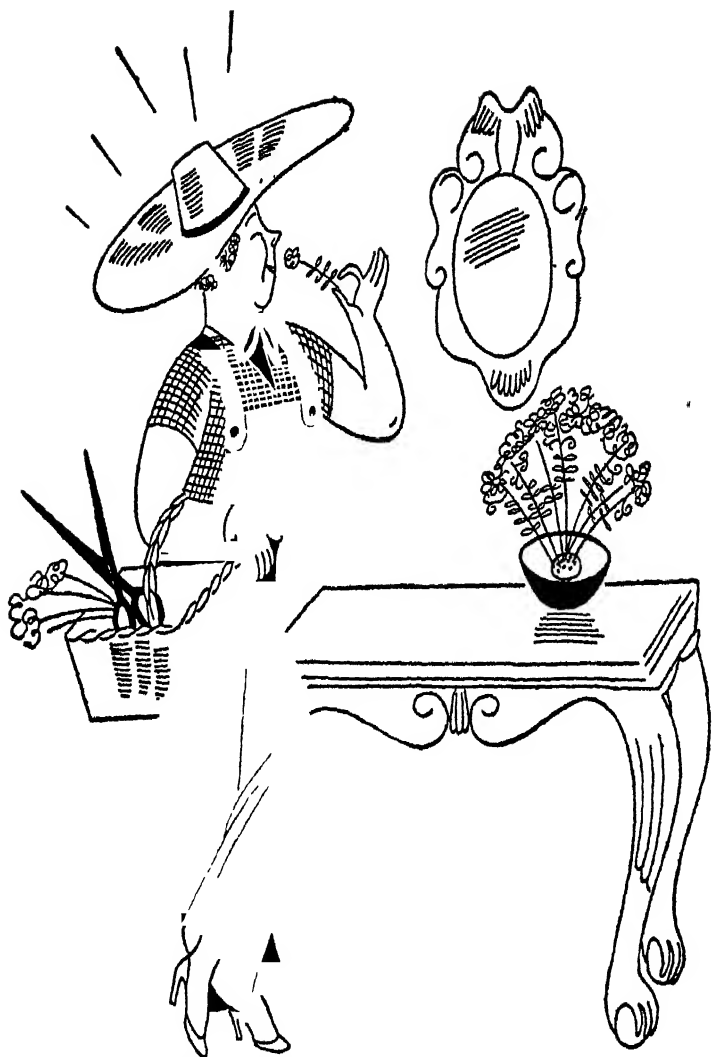
CONVERSATION, PLEASE

But if you constantly include them in your glance, they will feel part of the proceedings.

Now the next step in making friends requires a little more magnanimity than merely bestowing smiling glances on wallflowers. You must make opportunities for others to shine. If Evelyn has just returned from Bali on a tramp steamer and has told you two or three hilarious episodes, make way for her to tell the best of them to the others. If she's the proper sort of person she'll be your ally for life. If she isn't, chuck her out. In the same way let everyone know that Emil is putting up a new bank in Whynot, North Carolina, that Ariadne won the national Eat-More Betel-Nuts jingle contest, that Alex is the only man who ever finished the Japanese translation of *Mein Kampf*. Laugh at the witty sallies of your friends, give them credit for their acute observations and if they possess a certain kind of wit, humor or repartee, wangle the conversation around so they can exercise it. Make yourself an attentive and appreciative audience.

This brings us to the verge of flattery. As a matter of fact, let's have a word about flattery. In the first place it is a good idea to praise your friends frequently. But the praise should be uttered in an honest spirit.

There's nothing meaner in the world than the man who admires mean things. The rogue who has the force of character to perpetrate a program of evil is invariably a better man than his passive, skulking admirers. The man who flatters people for their vices and weaknesses is base. The



*Mrs. Blenheim grows the best sweet peas in Omps,
West Virginia.*

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

man who flatters when he doesn't mean a word of it (and don't let the "success" books whitewash your conscience) is a shabby human being.

But what about honest admiration? You must admire some things about your friends or they wouldn't be your friends. Mention their admirable qualities and mention them in the open. There is something pretty tenth-rate about people who run around whispering their compliments as if they were spreading scandal. It is not unusual to hear a remark like this: "I think Elizabeth's got the best taste in clothes of any woman I ever met but don't tell her I said so."

A good conversationalist would tell Elizabeth straight off. He would also tell Johnny Winthrop he was the wittiest man in Arkansas and Billy McGregor that his Irish setters would make the setters in the Dublin dog show green with envy.

Paying tribute where tribute is due is a legitimate means of giving others a good time. *But only where tribute is due.* It is not necessary to tell Mrs. Blenheim that her furniture is exquisite when it actually looks like the stage sets from "Diamond Lil." It happens that Mrs. Blenheim grows the best sweet peas in Omps, West Virginia.* Why not mention the sweet peas?

Finally, to be a good conversationalist one should know when to talk and when to listen. The value of listening will be discussed in the next chapter.

* And consider the pleasure of rolling Omps, West Virginia, across your tongue.

CHAPTER THREE

CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS

Know how to listen and you will profit even from those who talk badly.—PLUTARCH.

THE FIRST REQUISITE OF A GOOD CONVERSATIONALIST IS AN ability to listen. Listening to another human being is one of the friendliest acts we can perform. It is a far finer act than sending flowers to hospitals and opening motorcar doors for aged ladies. Listening is the greatest tribute we can pay to another's personality.

But everyone, you might say, listens.

The answer is (sorry to be so brusque) that everyone does *not* listen. Few do. Listening does not mean merely closing the mouth and letting another talk. Dead-fish listening is common enough among those who are tired, those who have just rolled off 80,000 words and cannot think up another postscript.

Real listening is something more positive. It means using the eyes to regard the speaker. It means absorbing what he says. It does not mean looking at the wallpaper, studying one's fingernails or conspiring to break in at the next semicolon.

If you think listening is an ordinary trait, try paying

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

strict attention to the next person who addresses you. Decide firmly to make no reply till thirty seconds after the final period.

Listen to the tones of voice, watch the speaker's eyes, observe how he puts his sentences together, his choice of words, the cogency of his ideas, his sincerity or lack of it, his shrewdness or naïveté. Whatever the obvious sense of the words, they also have overtones, undertones, implications that reveal a great deal about the speaker.

Perhaps the main interest in the talk is what the speaker left unsaid. An artful person might purposely leave a great deal unsaid. A guileless one might reveal more than he intended.

In any case, how much of this do you take in? Nothing at all, of course, if you don't listen, or listen with only one ear.

So, pay attention to the next person that addresses you. Follow as closely as if you intended to write it down afterward. You will realize you are having a new experience. And from the face of the person opposite you, you will realize he is having a new experience, too.

Let us take an example of not listening:

John: My cousin, Dick, broke his leg in Angora. The doctors didn't set the bones properly and he had to go all the way to Vienna to get fixed up. He had to stay in the Vienna clinic six weeks.

Anne: Uh, huh. A lot of terrible things can happen in places like that. A friend of mine had an experience in

CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS

Bolivia. She got bitten by some strange insect . . . (fifteen minutes' worth).

Next day:

Anne: John told me something that happened to his cousin . . . Fred . . . is that it? Oh yes, Dick. He was traveling in the Orient, no, the Near East . . . Damascus . . . that's it. He got pleurisy and nearly died in a hospital. Then they took him to Vienna and the train ride nearly finished him. But now he's getting well. You can't get any medical attention in those places at all.

Martha: Why, that's funny! That's not the story he told me at all. Why, he said that . . .

Anne: Imagine! Everyone says he's a little flip with the truth but personally this is the first time I ever had any experience with it.

Real listening is not easy. It requires concentration.

Most people pay undivided attention to only the first few words of what a speaker has to say. Someone says, for instance:

"I was out in the garden running down chipmunks when someone called to say a man was waiting to see me. It was a fellow from the insurance company who called to say Aunt Isabel had gone on the rampage and changed beneficiaries for the fifteenth time since January. The woman is simply bats. She . . ."

As soon as he can, the average "listener" jumps in with something like this:

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

"That reminds me of a story my Aunt Ella used to tell about . . ."

Now let us pause for a moment and try to guess what this gifted conversationalist is going to contribute. He shouldn't have been reminded of anything, of course. He should have kept still until the speaker finished up the subject. But if he *had* to be reminded of something, logic would suggest it be about insurance, about the evils of changing beneficiaries. But no! He listened to the first sentence and then caught the word "aunt." His mind ran off on a tangent.

"Aunt Ella," he says blithely, "used to have a lot of pet chipmunks in a cage and one day a rattlesnake got into the garden and . . ."

Enough! The interrupter never followed the conversation at all.

The active but undisciplined mind is constantly tempted to interrupt. Every word another man says suggests a witty reply, an allusion, an anecdote. He frames his sentences while the other man talks.

The first step in listening is to clamp down the lips. This part is fairly easy. But to keep one faculty suppressed, the others alert, requires self-discipline.

Once the habit is acquired, it pays immediate dividends. Good listeners pick up many a valuable or interesting piece of information. They learn something about human nature, human motives, human relations. Life for them is

CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS

more varied, more abundant, more colorful. They have the power to see life simultaneously from many angles.

Good listeners are the only people who have real friends. They not only keep their friends but acquire new ones. Open, friendly eyes and appropriate answers are more potent social weapons than beauty or a scintillating flow of language.

Those Who Won't

Does the ability to listen indicate that one should always listen when someone else chooses to talk? It does not! A good listener retains full liberty to decide when, for whom and for how long he will open up his ears.

It is bad to get the reputation for being a sponge. Those who acquire such a reputation get no respect or consideration from the garrulous talker.

Here again we should distinguish between friends and acquaintances.

Our intimate friends have certain rights. If they chatter about intrinsically dull things such as their office routine, their golf scores, their bridge triumphs, we accept it and may even enjoy it because it fits into a pattern: we know their histories, their mentalities, their emotional reactions.

If they are occasionally boring, we overlook it, knowing they will probably have similar occasions to forgive us. We cannot judge our friends as if they were radio entertainers.

But we can and should exercise severer judgment on ac-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

quaintances and strangers. We should never give them five-hour leases on our ears.

How long we should listen to a stranger or acquaintance depends upon his attitude toward us. If we have listened and then discover when we open our mouth that the person opposite us drums his fingers on the table, interrupts, gazes into space, we know we have drawn a boor.

There is only one thing to do: avoid the fellow, suppress him, treat him as rudely as possible. If we become the victim of boors and bores, we have only ourselves to blame.

In conversation there is only one vice more degrading than talking too much: it is listening too much.

CASE HISTORY A

Elinor M is a widow, aged 35. Her husband was a member of the U. S. consular service for twelve years. He had a small private income and so did Elinor. But when they were living in Japan, Uruguay, Belgium and Gibraltar, they managed to spend everything they had. Elinor never regretted the splurging even when her husband died and she was obliged to find a job. She had seen many strange ports, learned to understand people, acquired an experience that was to be useful.

She's now a travel adviser with an income that keeps her comfortably but not opulently in a Chicago apartment. She dresses well, finds money for going to the theater, buying books, entertaining her friends.

Elinor is not beautiful. She's not a dazzling conversationalist and if it were a question of finding arresting ideas, even her best friends would prefer a book by, say Dr. Alfred

CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS

Rosenberg. But she has other attractions. In her ramblings around the world she has learned to spot people with spurious ideals and spurious enthusiasms. Her friends are a sturdy, comfortable lot, whose reactions are usually predictable. They give life a certain solid aspect.

While Elinor is never dazzling, she is never boring. Her topics are ordinary enough but she talks with quiet conviction that implies she is sure of her audience. She is.

She is my candidate for the world's best listener. Or, perhaps I should say, "selective listener." Although she spends more time in listening than talking, she refuses to put on the earphones for anyone who feels like babbling. Anyone who finds her a good audience has proved he is a good audience himself.

In listening she doesn't strain her ears or eyes. She is quietly alert. She is sympathetic. A nervous speaker always finds reassurance in her eyes. Flighty people usually relax in her presence because her glance seems to say, "Take your time, I'll listen right up to the end."

When she talks herself, Elinor always seems to pick a topic that will interest everyone present. Her glance travels from one person to another, lingering longest, perhaps, on the one who is likely to feel out of it. Moreover, her conversation fits the *mood* of the majority. The Spanish war, for instance, happens to be her major interest at the moment, but she would never dream of bringing it up unless the people around her had the leisure and the inclination for such a conversation. To tired, tense or scatterbrained people she might talk about silly advertising slogans or a college boy's ideas of seduction.

Where did Elinor acquire this skill in making a conversation fit any group, any mood? A matter of instinct? Someone asked her and got this answer:

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

"It's not instinct at all—just rudimentary observation. You can tell if your guests like your dinners by watching them. The same thing goes for conversation. I know more or less what my friends like to talk about. With strangers I dangle a number of subjects and wait to see which ones get bites."

Elinor has such a long and exact memory that her friends don't take up much time with old prefaces to new stories. This memory of hers is one of the essential points of her friendships. Those who talk with her receive, consciously or unconsciously, a subtle sensation that life does have continuity, that it is not a series of meaningless chats in smoking rooms or busses.

If you see Elinor after a lapse of six months, she tells a great deal about what has happened to her. She expects you to do likewise. As a matter of fact, she helps it along with a series of questions: "Did you buy the car?" . . . "What happened to the stuttering gardener?" . . . "How did you like Alaska?"

You listen, she listens. Events and opinions are brought up to date. Life seems more supportable when it seems to have a pattern.

CASE HISTORY B

"Mary is such a marvelous conversationalist."

A good many people say this and Mary A, herself, would agree. She trafficks in people and naturally conversation is her chief stock-in-trade.

Mary is now about forty. She has divorced one husband, got herself a good apartment in New York, equipped it with new-fashioned furniture and an old-fashioned cook, and has gone in for a career.

CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS

This career consists in introducing a certain kind of dress pattern, guaranteed to bring Paris fashions right into your own home. Merely lay out the tissue paper on a piece of cloth, snip, sew up the edges and you've got a Vionnet or Lanvin. Out of the proceeds Mary has bought an Utrillo, a gold canary cage and a mother-of-pearl telephone apparatus that pops out of the wall when you press a button.

Mary is a dynamo of energy. She probably was a minor dynamo to begin with but people talked about it so much that her turbines are probably strong enough now to push the Queen Mary across the state of Wyoming. She uses her energy to run her business, drive a car, give dinners and cocktail parties, to dash (she never goes) to concerts and plays, to travel, to swim, to play bridge, to ride horses and to grind the pepper mill for those guests who don't know what it is.* On all her activities she has something to say. Too much, in fact.

At one of the cocktail parties a dowager lorgnetted me into a corner and demanded in a peremptory tone, "Why *do* people come here?"

Bereft of my wits, forgetting to ask why she came, I stammered, "I think they like all the noise and confusion."

The main point is that the customers are pretty numerous. They see a large living room, a dining room, and in summer a terrace, all crowded with Mary's menagerie. There are usually minor prize fighters, rich loafers, newspaper people, an author or two, sleek young women who certainly never made their dresses with Mary's patterns, perhaps a fat bald-headed man who has made tubs of money introducing a new kitchen gadget.

* That's why she bought it.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Mary receives at the door. If the guest is a woman, the greeting will be, "My dear, per-fect-ly ra-vish-ing! Where *did* you get it? It suits you mar-vel-ous-ly. Now come right over here. I want you to know . . ."



"Why do people come here?"

And if a man: "Darling! Where did you get that mar-vel-ous color? What, you haven't been away? It looks like months in Florida. Now right over here."

If this were the end, all would be well. But it isn't. Mary runs her guests as if they were marionettes on wires. She

CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS

chatters to one, then to another. She breaks into all conversations. She never listens to a single word. If two people off in a corner look content with each other's society, she separates them under her five-minute parking ordinance.

She herself contributes tidbits—about a new book, a new restaurant, what Lord Fulversham said at Cannes. Drinks are poured down unwilling throats, drinks are snatched from unwilling hands. Mary polices the parties with the ardor of a rookie cop. Everyone is befuddled, everyone inclines to the notion he's having a howling good time.

At her dinners Mary has an even better chance to keep everyone under her thumb. She calls it "keeping the ball rolling." This means chattering incessantly, interrupting others, and, of course, never listening.

One of her avowed principles is, however:

"Give everyone a chance to have his say."

It works out like this:

"Oh, I say, Marguerite, I hear you've signed a contract to make phonograph records . . ."

Marguerite says, "Why, yes, I . . ."

Mary shuts off her current. "How wonderful! Congratulations. Now do look out for the royalties clause. Sometimes they do you in. A friend of mine . . ."

Marguerite has had her say.

Mary turns to Captain Marchant. "I read your article in *The Rostrum*. You and Liddell Hart don't agree on defensive warfare. Now here's what I heard in England last summer . . ."

It soon becomes apparent that Mary is no authority on infantry tactics, that the teacup tacticians in England were either pulling her leg, or were complete nitwits. Anyway, Captain Marchant has had *his* say.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

How, you may ask, does the woman escape being choked? There are many reasons.

Most of Mary's customers seem to assume, like Dr. Johnson, that conversation is a conflict. The purpose is to keep talking and shut out the others. Mary wins and no one resents it.

Mary is a ruthless egoist but shrewd enough to pay in some measure for what she gets. She provides good food and drink; most of the guests believe with Rose Macaulay that "an hour spent in consuming nourishment is seldom an hour wasted."

Mary often performs favors, bestows little gifts.

She is an expert flatterer: "Alice, my dear, you've got a genius for discovering new perfumes." . . . "Allan's speaking voice reminds me of Leslie Howard's."

The dupes, purring like cats over saucers of cream, never realize that the remarks were made merely to shut them up.

Mary is invariably gay and radiant. This is genuine, not faked. It comes from a good digestion and a sated egoism. Her personality is probably a relief to many who spend their days with sneering bosses, sulky secretaries, overbearing spouses.

Sometimes there are deserters from the camp—perverse people who feel that food is no compensation for a woman who never stops talking and has never been known to listen. Mary notices the desertions only briefly.

There are plenty more coming up. Loads of people mean popularity. She refers to "my friends." She has no friends—only a few hundred acquaintances who accept her invitations when they have nothing else to do.

CLAMPING DOWN THE LIPS

CASE HISTORY C

Philip R: "How are you?"

Me: "Terrible! My mother-in-law burned down our house because I wouldn't buy Jimmy a pony. Jimmy is almost dead from scarlet fever. The mortgage people are foreclosing. The dentist says they'll all have to come out. The boss has been looking funny at me lately and to cap it all I just started making payments on an electric razor."

Phil: "My God, that's tough, isn't it? I've had some tough luck lately, too. The maid walked on the fresh paint. But what the hell! You've got to take things in your stride. Say, what do you think, I started taking skating lessons from a pro."

This conversation never took place but it would if I ever told my troubles to Phil.

I've known him for ten years. We occasionally invite each other for dinner. I've spent week ends at his place in the country. I've never been bored for an instant. We have one thing in common: we both think Phil is devilishly entertaining.

I know him better than Boswell knew Dr. Johnson. Not only the factual details of his biography but his whims, reactions, prejudices. Life has treated him well; he's usually gay and lighthearted. In moments of adversity he slumps into gloom but he's never sulky or disagreeable.

Sometimes he says, "Blazes! I've been talking about my affairs for an hour and never asked you if you decided to go to China."

He is referring to a critical decision in my life. My head is full of it and with any close friend I would want to discuss it. But to Phil I say, "I haven't decided yet." He looks relieved that we're skipping my problems.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

I've watched Phil with other people. When they talk about themselves his eyes take on a misty, faraway look. He never even makes a pretense of listening but sometimes he smiles as if he's toying with his secret thoughts. At the first silence he takes the floor and talks about himself.

Many are disgruntled with Phil. For myself, I have no complaint. He's made it clear that nothing I could say about myself could possibly interest him. We discuss his affairs or we find impersonal topics. This arrangement suits him and me. I have no desire to discuss my woes or triumphs. When I see Phil I expect to be amused. I am. No one else I have ever met can be so biographically entertaining.

A room can hold but one Kandinsky painting. A life can hold but one Phil. If I ever meet another I'll hold his head under water and recite "The Face on the Barroom Floor" one hundred times.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

THE IDEA FOR A CONVERSATION CLINIC CAME, I THINK, FROM a certain advertisement that used to brighten up American and English magazines. There was a picture of a man and woman, dressed in evening clothes, seated in the rear of a moving car. The man, middle-aged, something of the Sam Dodsworth type, looked bewildered and browbeaten. His wife, radiant and chiffony, was pouting. To find out what ailed her, you had to turn to the text.

The first sentence told you they were returning from a dinner party where the conversation had turned on Balzac. You said to yourself, "Serves them right for going to dinners where people talk about such things." You made a movement to banish the page from your sight. But it was a good advertisement; the look of distress in the man's eyes stayed your hand. You read on and discovered that the man was dejected because while all the others were contributing their bits on Balzac, he sat silent as a Trappist. He didn't know anything about Balzac. And now his wife was pouting because she had married a clod.

The whole tragedy might have been averted, she was saying, if Jim had only bought Somebody-or-Other's Fifty-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Foot Shelf. Had he bought it and absorbed the contents, a few pages a night, instead of playing bridge or gabbling about golf, he might have been able to chirp up with the rest of them.

Doubtless many readers were so impressed with the advertisement that they filled in the coupon and prepared to leap into every breach in the conversation with undigested facts about Balzac, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, stained glass in Asturias, the boll weevil, Mahavira's rule for dividing fractions, Louis XIV's mistresses, the annual rainfall of Bamaku, Catalonian primitives, the Gunz glaciation.

The idea of all this erudition running around dinner tables is appalling, of course. It's enough to give you 105 degrees of tizzy to reflect that even the veriest beginners with Somebody-or-Other's Fifty-Foot Shelf were expected to compass these subjects in a few nights of reading. The tougher customers were promised bigger triumphs. There are plenty of people ready to drag unsuitable subjects into conversation out of a genuine, if morbid, passion for schoolmastering; why encourage others to do so out of sheer bravado? This brings us to the subject of what to talk about.

Finding a Subject

Here are five suggestions for eliminating blank faces and muscle-bound smiles from all conversations:

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

1. Adjust your topics to the people around you.

A woman should not presume that her household problems will interest a man. A man is not likely to interest a woman with his puts and calls. A non-bridge player is not likely to be enthralled by the epic of six clubs doubled and redoubled. It is just likely that the chauffeur would be bored by a discussion of the Cézanne show. It takes the powers of a skilled novelist to entertain tonight's dinner party with tales of other days and other climes.

Most conversations should start off with a few casual remarks. Make a few tentative comments, ask a few questions and wait for the replies before committing yourself to any specific subject. The replies will not only indicate something of another's mental tone but will reveal his range of interests.

More specific clues will be provided by his profession, the place of his origin, his present home, his social and economic status. These things will be revealed by direct statement or by implication.

The speaker who thus learns something about the person opposite him will be able to find a subject of common interest. A speaker facing a general group will have only a general idea of his audience and will therefore find a more general subject.

Just before dinner I find myself with a middle-aged man who suffers from shyness. His few words indicate that he comes from the South, that he is a person of some education. His clothes are of good quality, conservatively cut.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

His gaze is fixed so intently on the Queen Anne table beside him that I remark, "It's a good piece, isn't it?" He answers, "Yes, it's pretty but the varnish looks so old." I see that we are not going to talk about furniture since he knows nothing about it. I ask a few questions. He comes from Virginia. This is his first trip away from home in twenty years. I ask how New York impresses him. His reactions are dull. I mention the latest war scare and mention President Roosevelt's words on dictators.

In rapid order, I learn that everything the President says is a monstrous error, that dictatorships are not so bad, that a modified dictatorship would be good for the United States.

Here I have a ripe subject for conversation: a bitter argument with the man from Virginia who obviously inherited his wealth and fears it may be taken from him. I deduce that the man got a good academic education and that it did him no good. He is but sketchily informed on the world's affairs. I wish by this time I could sprout wings and fly. In any case I don't see the purpose of a futile argument.

I carry the subject back to Ol' Virginny. The man glows. Obviously nothing interests him but his home town. I ask a question and he says he is a tobacco planter. He shows a disposition to relate all the town tittle-tattle. A little of this satisfies me and I get him to talk about tobacco.

I lead him away from the technical processes (which I could never hope to grasp) to different qualities of to-

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

bacco, how much it brings, why there is such a span between prices of raw and manufactured tobacco (President Roosevelt, he indicates, is to blame for this), why English tobacco tastes different from American. Then of his own accord he launches into an amusing topic: the mythology of tobacco advertising. This keeps me interested till we go in to dinner.

My dinner companion is a sprightly middle-aged woman. She looks alert and poised. I suspect she might be amusing. Lifting a glass I say, "What is this drink?"

"That," she says, "is cranberry juice, the drink that ruined America. It's full of vitamins, and vitamins are the curse of the country. The people are floating in vitamins; that's what makes them so crazy."

After the tobacco conversation, this dizzy chatter appeals to me. I say, "I always blamed our troubles on those breakfast foods—rye thinsies, puffle-wuffles, and all those."

"No, you're wrong, it's an excess of cranberry juice, prune juice, cucumber juice and all *those* . . ."

I remember a wry comment made on American appetizers by a French woman writing about her first trip to America. I ask my partner if she has read the book. She has. We suddenly forget to be frivolous and settle down to a discussion on books about America by foreigners. Before we get through we're roundly denouncing the foreigners who sneer at the country after spending a fortnight in New York. My partner reveals that she is editing a series of regional guides to America and we're off!

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

These two examples of conversation prove only one point: that it is sometimes necessary to prow! around a bit before finding a common subject of conversation.

One should avoid specialized topics. Because I happen to pick up a lot of facts and fancies about El Greco and his methods during a conversation with a group of painters, this does not mean I am free to introduce my information to a group that has no technical interest in painting. One little tidbit, however, might be of general interest. A Viennese critic maintains that El Greco's distortions were due to defective vision. I consider this balderdash but some weeks later I drag it out during a discussion on the deficiencies of great men. It creates more than a flicker of interest.

In adjusting a topic to one's audience, one should remember to reserve intimate conversation for intimate friends.

2. Talk about the things you understand.

Our work, social affairs, reading, give us a practically limitless choice of topics without pretending to a knowledge we do not possess. The businessman who thinks his knowledge of hides or sugar gives him the right to prate about international economy is tiresome at best, a nuisance at worst. A clubwoman who spouts pontifical opinions on books without giving credit to the review or lecture from which she pinched them is a comic spectacle.

The husband in the advertisement may have been a gay, diverting fellow who preferred to talk about the things

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

he understood. His foolish wife would have had him lapping up chunks of unrelated information and disgorging them to anyone who would have been ready to listen. The husband was quite right to keep still when Balzac was mentioned. Balzac had never been a part of his life or interests. Reading a few pages of *Eugénie Grandet* would not have given him anything to say.

3. Drop a subject if it doesn't catch on.

There were ten people in the room, none an enterprising conversationalist, and the host looked as if he were at his wits' end. He mentioned the latest front-page murder. No one seemed interested. He switched to a book he was reading, about fantastic searches for treasure in sunken ships. Result: one woman had an aunt who went down on the *Lusitania* with thirty thousand dollars' worth of jewels. (It was obviously the jewels and not the aunt that gave the speaker's voice its note of poignancy.)

The host mentioned the New York World's Fair and tried to start a controversy by saying world's fairs^{*} were obsolete. This led to four dullish anecdotes on world's fairs of the past. The host, undaunted, switched from one thing to another and finally told a sprightly story about a time he was tempted to steal a Gideon Bible from a hotel. This caught on. It seemed that everyone there had been tempted to steal something from a hotel room and everyone wanted to talk about it. A flock of short incidents resulted and all were amusing. The conversational ma-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

chinery was now oiled up and proceeded on its own momentum. Much better things than pilfering from hotels developed before the evening was over but the point is, nothing would have developed if the host hadn't dropped the unsuitable subjects and fished around for new ones.

One should never hesitate to drop a subject like a hot potato if it fails to arouse interest, if it threatens to become a bore or, worse, if it precipitates disagreeable arguments.

4. Ask questions.

For starting a conversation questions are absolutely necessary. Once the conversation is launched they serve other purposes. They help you to find out what you want to know. They act as a delicate brake on verbose talkers. They guide a talker into the phase of a subject that is most likely to interest his audience. Finally, questions are enormously flattering to a speaker. A brilliant conversationalist performs better when he knows he has struck a responsive chord in an audience.

Let no one quote Dr. Johnson to prove that asking questions is unmannerly. Dr. Johnson hated questions because they slowed up his interminable discourses. Unless we give long discourses, we have an unalienable right to ask any questions we like except, of course, such matters as, "How much did you pay for your coat?" and "When did you stop taking dope?"

5. Answer questions.

This should be a superfluous comment but it is not.

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

Many people try to avoid answering questions. Through heedlessness or perversity, they skip the subjects or the phases of subjects that would be most likely to interest their audiences. They talk to please themselves.

The most perfect example of this trait I can recall occurred in a long windy story about a motor trip in the Alps. The speaker said, "Then we came to the summit and it was one of the most glorious views I have ever seen. I was driving myself because that was the day my chauffeur fell down the ledge and I lost my grip on him. But as I say, this view was tops. The sky that day was a . . ."

Torpid listeners came to life. There was a chorus of interruption: "What! Your chauffeur . . . how did he . . . what did you do . . . ?"

The speaker looked annoyed. Why? Because he thought he had told about the chauffeur before and realized now that he had missed a good opportunity to tell a dramatic story? Oh, not at all! He was far less interested in the chauffeur than in the glorious view of the white clouds topping the saffron-colored sky. (It sounded like a description of a lemon meringue.) Now he was forced to tell about the chauffeur.

Detail after detail was dragged out of him. He said in a vexed tone, "Well, he slipped over a precipice, that's all. He shouted and I ran. I caught hold of him but when I bent down to get a better grip he let go the ledge for some reason and crashed down below. Hundreds of feet. That's all there is to it. As I was saying about this view . . ."

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

All this we shall sum up with the mild observation that the questions put to us often indicate what people would like to hear from us.

CASE HISTORY A

Sven H is a lumberjack who started his career in Norway and is now pursuing it in the woods of northern Minnesota. Judging by his letters he might have spent eight months of his life in school and his mark must have been E minus. He has never read a book, never heard an opera, never bounced around a night club.

Sven is a great conversationalist. He talks with gusto about the things he knows. He knows the woods, the habits of plants and animals. He knows simple human beings who have always been chained to the soil. He has a sharp, naked gaze that reduces human problems to their simplest elements.

Sometimes the simplicity of his mind makes his opinions, particularly on complex matters, quite useless. But again his remarks have the ring of profound, universal truth. What he says often sounds shocking to minds that have been made devious and complicated by book-fed reactions. Sven is guileless and open, yet his conversation is not without artifice.

He takes good care to tell you what he thinks you would like to know. He usually guesses right. When you first meet him he is strictly impersonal. Later he will talk about himself. He insists you meet him on an equal plane by divulging some of your own opinions and experiences.

CASE HISTORY B

Long before you meet Howard G his friends will tell you,



Sven is a great conversationalist.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

"He deserves a lot of credit because he has practically educated himself."

After you meet him you say to yourself, "Would that he had let himself alone!"

As a child Howard was bobbin boy or something of the sort in a New England textile mill. He pulled himself up to become head of the mortgage department in a New York bank.

Howard is a specialist in people. When he talks about his personal experiences with men and women, you detect in him some of the qualities of a good novelist. He selects incidents and quotes words that make the characters come to life. In addition, he possesses an invincible sense of comedy. Anything he relates from his own observation makes life a more vivid spectacle. He has had many jobs, many ups and downs, met many kinds of people. He has acquired a certain basic wisdom about human affairs and he knows how to express his reactions in salty phrases.

Unfortunately this does not satisfy him. He has heard about something he calls "culture" and he decided to get some. By "culture" he means all sorts of unrelated information dragged into the conversation by the hair of its head.

Up to now he hasn't bought Somebody-or-Other's Fifty-Foot Shelf but he buys "informative" books and magazines. "Informative" is the most overworked word in his vocabulary. "Culture" gushes out of him like vinegar out of "genuine 1840 cognac" bottles. If anyone so much as mentions the Declaration of Independence, he'll reel off all the signers. If anyone asks him to step into an unfamiliar room he laughs and says, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here. That's Dante." At the drop of a hat he will outline

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

the Seven Years' War, explain the Diesel engine or tell the plot of *Il Trovatore*.

Those who hear him when he is talking naturally—from his own experience—conclude he is a shrewd and witty person. Those who see him when he's had a rush of culture to the head wonder if he is a boor or a jackass.

Business Conversations

This subject deserves extended treatment but someone will have to found a clinic to handle special research. We have time here for only a few phases of business conversations.

Most business men may be divided into two classes, those who are very busy and those who are trying to look busy.

In our practical dealings with them, the rest of us must try to believe they all belong to the first class. We must state our errand briefly and concisely, wait for a reply and know when to make for the door.

But this must not be interpreted too literally. Businessmen—even those magnificoes who dwell in remote and polar regions, barricaded by telephones, push buttons and secretaries—must not be considered robots. Even if the visitor were limited to two hundred words, he could devote a few of them to personal comment with an eye to starting or confirming friendly relations.

Those who want something from a business executive, salesmen and jobseekers, for instance, are likely to make egregious blunders. Often their minds are too intent on

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

their own purposes. They treat the man behind the desk as if he were a statue. If he looks grim and humorless, they are apt to make a wisecrack. If he looks tired or timid, they are likely to grow bold and blustering. They talk as if they were making a public address.

Even in the briefest conversation there is time to adjust oneself to the business executive. The visitor should use his eyes. What sort of man is he dealing with? What sort of approach seems most suitable? Does the executive enjoy talking, showing off a bit? Then why not give him an opportunity? Is he nervous and fretful, eager to conclude the interview? If so, isn't he likely to feel kindly toward a visitor who will not linger unnecessarily? In any case the visitor should refrain from making a set speech. He should talk to *one* man.

You will remember that Queen Victoria complained that Gladstone treated her like a public meeting. He orated. Disraeli, arch-rival of Gladstone, treated the sovereign with more tactful deference. He made her feel—not like a public meeting—but like a woman of matchless charm and intelligence. If Queen Victoria needed bolstering up, what about the vice president of the Aluminum Cranberry Corporation?

How Long to Talk

We all of us can remember good conversations that consisted of a genuine exchange of ideas. A tranquil room, comfortable chairs, drinks, a fire, perhaps, incited a group

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

to talk for hours. We were able to propose ideas, to develop them, to support them with examples, even to toss in apposite anecdotes.

One idea led to another—a change of speakers. We enjoyed listening as much as talking. The conversation flowed on smoothly and there was no wild competition, no desire to shut off a man before he had finished.

But such occasions are rare. In large groups, a conversation of ideas is hard to sustain. It is sometimes hard in small groups whose members don't know each other well. In such circumstances, conversation should be a rapid give-and-take. One should avoid topics that take a long time to develop. Five minutes may be a short time for a man about to die, but for a man listening to a windy anecdote, it's an eternity.

In general, how long should one talk at one time? Listen to the opinion of Dean Swift:

"Take as many half-minutes as you can get but never talk more than half a minute without pausing and giving others an opportunity to strike in."

This, it must be admitted, is a counsel of perfection. It is a rule for the virtuoso. Few of us have enough dexterity with words to get very much said in half a minute. Why not, therefore, widen the time limit to two minutes?

In his famous essay on conversation, Thomas De Quincey proposed two ideas for regulating the flow of conversation. In the first place he would appoint a "symposiarch," a censor or dictator, empowered to suppress the gabby or

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

limit them to a given number of minutes. In the second, he would install a "clepsydra," a water timepiece, filled with colored liquids.

At first glance the idea is attractive. It brings up a picture of a benevolent tyrant sitting behind a row of vials filled with red and blue and amber fluids. From time to time the voice of the tyrant would boom forth:

"Jones, you've babbled three clepsydras' worth on your hockey triumphs. Enough!"

Or:

"Mrs. Romagne, the purple vial has run out. The part about your third husband getting chased by the cheetah will be postponed till tomorrow."

But De Quincey lived before Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin arrived to show how unbenevolent tyrants can be. Despotism control of conversation might function perfectly for a while but sooner or later the tyrant would substitute the whip and the castor-oil bottle for the harmless clepsydra. Eventually we would be out in the doghouse whispering, "Sh-sh! . . . I don't want the people in the next house to report me for having an illegal conversation. I reported my radio out of order so I won't have to listen to the Grand Kleagle's speech tonight."

De Quincey's idea, for all its fascinations, will have to be abandoned. While we are still free men we might impose a little discipline on ourselves. The clever might adopt Swift's suggestion. The rest of us might become two-minute men, never exceeding the maximum unless the

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

others in the company, by explicit words or eyes glowing with interest, ask for more.

Transitions

One of the most important elements in conversation is the matter of transition—switching from subject to subject. Obviously a conversation cannot thrive on the same subject hour after hour. Someone has to shift gears. One of the signs of the good talker is his dexterity in shifting.

If a friend says to me, "I've been having more trouble with my stomach lately," I cannot say, "Do you think America will lose the Davis Cup this year?" The rules of the game forbid any such rude change of subject. All the same, I am fed up with listening to talk about his ailments, I am convinced that talking about them is bad for him, I feel that a bit of chatter about the Davis Cup would be pleasant for both of us.

So, what to do? Offhand I can think of two things:

One, I can make a polite comment and then keep still, hoping that my friend will change the subject himself or fall into silence, allowing me, after a decent lapse of time, to introduce a new topic.

Two, I can make one comment on the stomach trouble, another on illness in general, express the opinion that a lot of minor ailments are due to a lack of exercise, tell about Jimmy who cured himself of a nervous disorder by playing tennis, quote someone's opinion that the quality of tennis in America is constantly improving. Then I can

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

say, "Do you think America will lose the Davis Cup this year?"

This, of course, is a far-fetched case, implying that I am hell-bent on bridging the gap between two widely disparate subjects. It also implies that I had to achieve a transition without assistance. It is more likely that the transition would work out like this:

I would make a sympathetic response. My friend would mention a trip to the doctor where he met our friend Christopher. And I would say, grasping at a straw, "What's new with Christopher?"

Before leaving the subject let us look at a conversation that actually took place. I do not intend to scour my memory for the most brilliant conversation I ever heard. Something simple and casual will serve the purpose. So, why not last night's dinner chatter?

In setting down a skeletonized version of the talk, it should be emphasized that conversation and literature are two different things. Conversations when written out exactly as they took place lose their spontaneity. Their special atmosphere derives from tones of voice, glances, gestures, silences. The best dialogue in plays and novels is not, paradoxically, natural dialogue. It has been doctored up to make it *sound* natural. A conversation taken down on a dictaphone and introduced into a play or novel would have the audience murmuring, "But people don't talk that way!"

We take a risk, then, in setting down a conversation without editing. But for a book on conversation that is

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

the only thing to do. We are dealing with a conversation that actually took place, not an amalgam of every clever thing the writer could pick up over a period of weeks.

The dinner guests were Beatrice D, a bridge expert, Hubert M, a commercial artist, Alice A, librarian of a private collection. They had never seen each other before. Thus one staple of conversation—gossip about common friends and experiences—was missing.

While the drinks were being passed, there was a bit of random, fragmentary chitchat. The host, by asking a number of questions, by referring to each one's activities, hoped to get them all orientated in short order.

It was at the table that the conversation really got started. Someone mentioned "the week-end habit" and Beatrice said, "You mean the week-end vice. As a prominent victim of the vice I say it's the worst time-killer and demoralizer I know. Your brain is in a state of confusion all summer long. You look up trains. You wire the hour of your arrival. You wonder if the host will send a car or if you will have to take a bus. You pack. I've got lists made for every kind of place—the golfing places, the dress-up places, the undress places—all neatly pasted on the closet door, and still I always pack the wrong things. Then you buy a gift for the hostess. There is the business of getting yourself adjusted to different houses, stiff ones, formal ones, slovenly ones. You always get too much sun, too much rain, too much exercise . . . by September you're a wreck. I forgot to say that on Monday mornings you

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

always have to write saying you left your fountain pen or your walking shoes and will they please send them. Leaving things is the most demoralizing part of it, isn't it?"

Hubert: "It is for me. Last week end I left a pair of Burmese ivory bowls in the bathroom and I've been brooding about it all week."

Beatrice: "But why take Burmese ivory bowls on week ends?"

Hubert: "I didn't take them. I left them. They belonged to the host. It's the same every week end. I sit around eyeing the things I have to leave such as a Swedish barometer, or a painted Italian cigarette box. I picked up a lot of Calvinistic superstitions about other people's property from my mother and I've never been able to get over them."

(Transition) Alice: "My objection to the week-end vice, as you call it, is the expense. I've been saving up my money for a shopping orgy in Europe, so I didn't go out of town all summer. But after this noble self-control I couldn't get away from the library for a six weeks' vacation, so I had to cancel the reservation." She revealed quite incidentally that the steamship companies were swamped with applications and thus touched on something everyone seemed to want to talk about: the rush to Europe. When this wore thin it looked as if the talk would turn to the unsettled state of Europe—a discussion of international politics. But Hubert said:

(Transition) "All the companies seem to be getting a record load of non-paying passengers." He talked about

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

the epidemic of stowaways. He had one short anecdote with plenty of suspense and dramatic interest that would (one of the listeners decided) serve as an excellent plot for a short story. After this there were a few casual observations on stowaways.

(Transition) Beatrice: "Has anyone read Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*? That's the best stowaway story I know."

Alice: "I read it, but it's the *only* stowaway story I know."

Beatrice: "It's the only one I know, too."

(Transition) Alice: "One of the most interesting things about the tale was the smooth way Conrad explained the character of the murderer. He hardly spoke a word in self-defense but you knew he was justified." It looked as if this might become a tedious talk on Conrad so . . .

(Transition) The host dwelt on the character of the murdered man, exposed so deftly and devastatingly by Conrad. "It's the same theme Borgese elaborated in *Goliath*—the man who exults in evil for evil's sake, who commits wrong without plausible motive. When you meet the type in a book you always set it down as grandiose fiction. But when you come right down to it, we meet the type, built on a smaller scale, right in our own daily lives."

(Transition) Beatrice: "I know what you mean." She related an incident that befell her when she hired a man to row her across a lake at night. "He was recommended by the hotel so I didn't feel I was taking a risk. He looked harmless, too, and I imagine any court would pronounce him sane . . . but oh, my God, the night of horror! . . .

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Yet he never once laid a hand on me . . . just those eyes . . . that leer . . . I never thought I'd come out of it alive and he simply glugged himself on my terror."

(Transition) Alice: "He must have been temporarily mad. I had a similar experience . . ." This is a bad sort of transition because it either misses the point or shifts the point of what went before. Moreover, it usually leads to a profusion of personal experiences. But Alice's story (about being caught in the same room with a madman) was too gripping to encourage others to match it. If she were put on trial for a conversational misdemeanor, she could point out that the others urged her on by demanding details. At the end there was a lot of miscellaneous chatter about the impulses of madmen.

(Transition) Beatrice: "A Russian novelist used a scene like Alice's experience to build up a whole book . . ." Beatrice's comments were interesting but she had no business bringing up the book when she couldn't remember the author or title, which was precisely what everyone wanted to know. Hubert almost had it, then lost it.

(Transition) Hubert: "Oh well, don't expect anything of me. I'm illiterate. The movies and the picture magazines are responsible. Sad, too, I was such a bright boy. At sixteen I was simply wallowing in Dostoevsky and Kuprin. At eighteen I was knee-deep in Bloomsbury poets. At twenty I had a nervous breakdown from discovering 'significant younger novelists.' Then it was Wodehouse, then Mary Pickford's theological discoveries, then . . ."

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

The host: "And what is it now?"

(Transition) Hubert: "Mystery stories!"

Alice: "You *have* gone to the dogs. Reading those things is the most boring occupation I know. I'd rather read the Shanghai telephone directory."

(Transition) No one agreed with Alice. She was confronted with three mystery-story addicts who plunged into an argument about the best writers of the tales, the best trick endings. No one, fortunately, told the plot of a mystery but various comments were made on the character of famous detectives, unfair solutions, difficulties in recalling mysteries once they are laid aside, etc. This kind of conversation has a great advantage: everyone must rack his brains to find illustrations and examples. The talk is pleasantly jagged and haphazard. Everyone gets his say. In this instance even Alice did. She told how her employer kept important callers waiting till he could finish a chapter in a mystery.

At this point the host went out to mix drinks. When he returned he heard:

(Transition) Alice: "Oh yes, I've heard all this talk about 'getting away from it all.' I was 'away from it all' one whole year when I taught school in Bolivia. In the end I made up my mind that in the future I would find out where 'it' all was and stay there."

(Transition) Beatrice: "Oh yes, this unlimited leisure stuff is all illusion. We all of us just love being flurried. Nothing makes us happier than romping to the telephone,

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

dashing to cocktail parties, trying to fit seventeen engagements into twelve hours. Complaining about a lack of time is usually the sign of a happy man or woman."

(Transition) Host to Hubert: "By the way, how's your behavior holding up while your wife's in the country?"

Hubert: "Why bring that up? I had planned for a grand debauch lasting seven days. After that I was going to spend seven days at home, absolutely alone, doing chores and reading. Well, the first week I moped and the second I seem to be going in for quiet little dinners."

The host: "I'm sorry, but if you wanted a Saturnalia you might have let me know in advance. I used up my last opium last night and all my fast women I let off for the evening to attend a strawberry sociable."

Hubert: "My own fault. Or rather the fault of the preachers. In my youth they had me thinking life would be a constant series of temptations. Occasions of sin dangling from every bough. Nothing but wassail and love nests."

Beatrice: "And it hasn't turned out that way?"

Hubert: "Not at all! You have to fight for your temptations in this world. If you relax for a moment you find yourself mired in virtue. That's what I'm in now. Too tired to go out and drum up a little sin. It's turned into slippers and radio—and my mother-in-law who's coming tomorrow."

The host had to answer the telephone and when he returned, Hubert was finishing up some remarks about his

THE ANATOMY OF CONVERSATION

mother-in-law. "She snoops into closets and cupboards. She's sure the Mexican stuff is out of place in the living room. She spends hours fluffing pillows. She's one of the most distinguished pillow-fluffers of this generation. She meanders around feeling radiators. They're always too hot or too cold. She runs her hands over the table covers and sheets to see if they're good silk or linen."

The host: "In short, one of those women who run around feeling everything."

Hubert (simulating resentment): "Well, she always spoke very well of you."

(Transition) Alice to Beatrice: "I don't know how you feel, but I'd feel like a hussy if I were responsible for keeping this man out late. Let's get going so he can be fresh for his mother-in-law tomorrow."

There was a movement to get under way, carried out with decent dispatch. But in leaving Hubert pointed to a Tibetan *thangka*. "I love that Chinese wall hanging, is it Chinese?"

The host: "This is not a week end!"

In setting down this whole conversation I purposely refrain from improving it. It would look better if it were lengthened with some of the wisecracks made at various stages of the talk. It would look better still if it were doctored up to give it a more sprightly air. But do not forget that the pace of the talk is set by gestures, glances, laughter, which cannot be parsed and diagrammed.

The main point is that three people who had never met

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

before had a good time in a general, more or less impersonal conversation. The transitions, all natural, unforced, helped to swing it along.

Transitions should be made with the eyes wide open. To switch subjects needlessly is one of the signs of an uncivilized mind. It shows that the switcher cannot follow a train of thought, that his mind has no continuity. When the speaker has a legitimate topic, by no means exhausted, still capable of interesting others in the company, it is rude and inconsiderate to shift.

But let us say that the topic is exhausted and the majority would like a change. Then let the shifter shift deliberately. If he can do it by gradual steps so much the better. If not, let him do it abruptly. One of the best conversationalists on the planet has a habit of saying when the subject seems worn out and everyone else seems powerless to change it, "Well, not to change the subject or anything . . ." With this, he changes boldly from the Toscanini broadcasts to the explosion in the next block.

CHAPTER FIVE

THOSE WHO KNOW HOW

ROBERT W IS A LAWYER, 34 YEARS OLD, MARRIED, TWO children. His interests: his wife, his children, his law practice, golf, bridge, European politics, Marcel Proust, wines and cocktails, Handel's music, finding a shower curtain that won't rip or rust after three months.

~~He dares say~~ Since he spends six to ten hours a day with praecipies, replevins and wives whose husbands don't understand them, he gets, I daresay, a chance to roll off fifty thousand words a day. But instead of letting this whet his appetite for more, he behaves, when he emerges at the close of the day, as if he were content to let others do the talking.

No one has ever said, "He tells one screaming story after another." (This would be untrue.)

No one ever said, "He's a marvelous raconteur." (This would be untrue.)

No one ever said, "He's so witty." (This would be untrue. He has a good sense of humor, nothing more.)

But scores say, "Oh, please drop in to my party—if only for a few minutes."

And I say, "He's the best conversationalist I ever met."
Why?

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

His conversation is easy, varied, casual. He rarely talks for more than two minutes at a time unless others ask questions to keep him going. Even when he has an audience that would be glad to listen indefinitely, he shrewdly begins asking questions himself.

He suits his topics to his audiences. He does not drag out personal affairs or his innermost convictions for casual acquaintances.

With them he can keep up a perfectly satisfactory conversation about the weather, life in trailers, yesterday's front-page murder. He'll talk about bridge only to those who play bridge, about a new play to those who have seen the play or manifestly want to find out about it.

He reserves intimate conversation for intimate friends. When he tells you something, you have a feeling he thought it would interest *you*, not that he wanted to tell it to *someone*. When an intimate friend is talking to him, he listens with wholehearted attention. If he doesn't quite follow, he interrupts gently, "But I don't understand why you did that." Again he is silent and his smile or his look of dismay indicates the warmth of the devotion he bestows on friends.

In general gatherings he is often silent for long periods of time but sometimes his attentive silence seems the only cohesive element in the conversation. If any speaker gets off a good giddy wisecrack or a subtle observation, Bob's face expresses applause.

THOSE WHO KNOW HOW

When he breaks into speech, his phrases are crisp, his remarks have a beginning, an end and no rambling bypaths.

It is not easy to put a finger on his success. But this you know: when you have said good-by, you know you have had a good time. You are not tired or nervous. You never leave his house with a worse opinion of yourself than when you entered. From him you get no insight into your faults, your ignorance. If you made a number of idiotic remarks during the talk about Italian submarines, you're almost sure he didn't hear. But you did get off one first-class remark and you won't forget the way his face lighted up.

X If he wants to disagree with you, even to point out that he considers some of your opinions crackpot, he does so in forthright fashion without sniggling sneers or sarcasm.

He admits his own errors freely and apologizes promptly when the occasion calls for it. What's more, he admits his foibles. His wife said to him on one occasion, "If it was such a *mysterious* noise, why didn't you go down and investigate?"

He replied with utter seriousness, "I was afraid."

She was taken back. "But you went down that other night when *I* heard sounds in the basement."

"I had to be brave in front of you."

This was not persiflage. It was easy to see that Bob was not too curious about strange noises in the night.

When you talk about Bob, few wisecracks cling to your memory. You laughed when he said to the too-fertile woman novelist, "Good God, dear lady, are you with book

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

again?" And his answer when someone suggested slyly that he was on too friendly terms with a movie actress for



"Good God, dear lady, are you with book again?"

whom he was trying to obtain a divorce: "It's all very flattering, but we're strictly perpendicular friends."

You laugh frequently, as a matter of fact, but the remarks always fit specific occasions. There is nothing to lift .

THOSE WHO KNOW HOW

from its context and quote by way of embellishing another conversation.

When I hold up Robert W as the perfect conversationalist I realize that few will be able to check my accuracy. He is known to a large number of clients, a small number of friends. It is unlikely he will take to broadcasting on the radio or appearing on night-club programs as "the perfect conversationalist."

I should like, therefore, to mention a few others who have a wider audience. I shall make no attempt to list the ten best conversationalists or anything of the sort—merely to mention at random a few people, living or dead, who are known to all readers of newspapers and who are for me, recollections of good conversations.

Mary Garden. A waiter said, "The dessert this evening is *Pêche Mary Garden*." Miss Garden eyed the dish reflectively, "When they start naming fruit after you, you know you're famous—or finished." She has her wisecracks and she has a certain electric quality that would lend interest to anything she cared to say. But she does not depend too much on her natural advantages. She knows her audiences, whether it's one person, a dozen, or three thousand. Possessing a many-sided personality, she turns on the facet that appeals most to any audience at any given moment. This is not insincerity; it is high courtesy and at times it requires sharp self-discipline. More limited personalities who make no concessions to their audiences could learn a few things from Mary Garden.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Babe Ruth. He is included here to illustrate an important point. He has been a great potentate in a certain realm. If he cared to pose as a great authority in fields foreign to his knowledge he would always have an audience. But Babe Ruth knows what he knows; his talk is simple and appealing because it is drawn from his own experience and conviction. What's more, it is always directed at a particular audience.

Edith Wharton. A stylized conversation. Everything she had to say was as aptly phrased, as economically worded, as if she were putting it into a book. She had a certain stately gesture—raising the right arm with hieratically outstretched fingers—that marked her opening sentence. While she was talking, the fingers remained taut. When she had finished, the fingers relaxed and the arm sank. It emphasized the precision of her speech. She rarely talked about herself. Hers was a conversation of ideas, bulwarked by wide knowledge and individual interpretation. This kind of talk came natural to her. She was brittle, lucid, learned; deficient, perhaps, in humor. Listening to her brought this conclusion: that all conversation of this type should be limited to those with Edith Wharton's endowments.

Senator James Hamilton Lewis. A florid style of conversation that seems tiresome until it becomes clear that it is entirely natural. Senator Lewis has a florid mind. His bizarre clothes, his fantastically elegant gestures, deserve another setting such as Bath under the Regency or the Tuileries under the Second Empire. Because he is unique

THOSE WHO KNOW HOW

in our day, his style is amusing. He is not only florid but prolix, full of resounding periods. In commenting on the weather he sometimes sounds like Edmund Burke beginning a thunderous oration on the French Revolution. His conversation is effective because it fits his character. If all the people who go in for grandiose conversation could be induced to adopt certain Lewis specialties—his exquisite manners, his pink whiskers, his mustard-colored vests—grandiose conversation would be less of a strain on the rest of us.

William S. Paley. Most big business executives talk so much that others cannot even slip in a question. The head of the Columbia Broadcasting System talks clearly and to the point. Then he waits for a comment or question. He does not fake knowledge he does not possess. No matter how rushed, he conveys the idea that he has nothing to do but finish the conversation in hand if it takes all day. He doesn't fidget or rustle papers. Because he is cool and unflurried, because he punctuates his talk with silence, he makes five minutes seem like a long, leisurely interview.

Sophie Tucker. All Americans who strive to acquire the suave, vacuous quality of English upper-class conversation could learn a lesson or two from Sophie Tucker. Nature gave her a husky voice, a bumptious, raffish wit. Her every word, every gesture, is stamped "Broadway." She is one of London's great favorites. Did Sophie show her gratitude by conforming to English modes of speech? Did any Englishman ever say to her, "One would never believe you

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

are an American"? Not on your tintype! In conversation, as on the stage, Sophie is triumphant—without the loss of a single vowel.

Liam O'Flaherty. One of his typical conversations lasted four hours. He interrupted himself only to signal to a waiter and light cigarettes. He had an interested audience for his monologue on the American character, life on ship-board, the Gaelic language, travels in Spain, Hitlerism, life versus art, a score of other topics. He rattled on and on, making it clear that he welcomed no competition. There are probably no more than five people on the planet with Liam O'Flaherty's dazzling conversation.*

Gertrude Stein. She has more minority opinions than any Supreme Court justice since the Whisky Insurrection. She expresses them in lucid phrases that are disconcerting to those who expect her to talk as she writes. Argumentative people are usually conversational pests. But Miss Stein is not an arguer. She says so herself. "I never argue, because it's a waste of time. I simply state what I know to be the truth." Lest other arguers adopt this formula let us hasten to add that she does not argue for the sake of arguing. Her mind is constructed according to an original pattern and she expresses herself with so much persuasion and color that she is a great conversationalist. Query to all arguers: have you an original mind or aboriginal manners?

George Arliss. He understands the use of the period better than any talker I have ever heard. His reputation for

* Quite enough.

THOSE WHO KNOW HOW

cleverness is overrated, but he does have something to say. He says it and down comes the period! It descends so swiftly that no one else has a remark handy. But Mr. Arliss remains alertly silent while the others fumble for a rejoinder. This makes for a pleasantly disjointed and impromptu conversation. Mr. Arliss is caustic, thin-lipped, parsimonious with words. It is always difficult to tell whether Arliss the actor imitates Arliss the man or vice versa.

William Bullitt. The American ambassador to France is unambassadorish. Meaning that he doesn't mind talking to the point. If anyone in the world has the right to carry on a stuffed-shirt conversation it is an ambassador; he can always excuse himself on the ground that plain words might endanger international amity. Mr. Bullitt has no necessity to avail himself of the excuse. When he is willing to talk he uses clear words. When talk would be tactless he simply keeps still. This simple formula can be recommended to all government employees, industrial leaders, movie stars.

Ganna Walska. This is for women only. Suppose you have an exotic type of beauty, an exotic taste in clothes, perfumes, jewelry, interior decoration. What are you going to do about your conversation—develop some exotic taste here, too? Many women, unfortunately, shout "yes!" Ganna Walska has another answer. Her looks, her gowns, her jewels, her houses, even her gardens, are in a class apart. She might have finished it off with a sort of Iris March

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

conversation. But she did nothing of the sort. Her conversation is artless simplicity; she doesn't even mind saying naïve things. Instead of putting her down as a naïve woman, the listener is likely to mutter, "Just what I'd say if I had the nerve." The contrast between her appearance and her speech is one of her chief charms.

Clarence Darrow. He was one of the greatest conversationalists in the world. His manner was benign and mellow, his subjects were infinitely varied, drawn from his vast knowledge, his rich experience. Many of his graces were peculiar to him, not easily imitated. We shall, therefore, segregate one little trait, not common but easily cultivated: his compassion for all human beings made him turn his attention to the timid, the least articulate members of any group. Without lowering the level of the conversation he placed everyone on terms of equality. Not only did the underdog thank him but the brilliant ones got their dividends in more receptive audiences.

Æ (George Russell). Let us look at a bad situation. Suppose a man has a large, round, ebullient mind full of wit, wisdom, imagination, information, opinions. He has tremendous gusto, power to impose his will on others. He likes to talk and nothing can stop him. The best he can do, I think, is to follow the methods of Æ, who is now probably telling anecdotes to the seraphim. Æ was one of those natural, buoyant, overwhelming raconteurs you meet every now and then. He had a special technique for dominating a conversation. In the first place his voice was

THOSE WHO KNOW HOW

always changing pitch and tempo, lending variety to his anecdotes. In the second place, he involved every listener in his tales by asking questions, demanding opinions, exacting attention with his eyes. As a result the listeners thought they had got in more words than they actually had. Everyone seemed to have a good time, and if all the people addicted to long discourses could say the same, the neurologists could spend more time on the golf links.

Yvonne Printemps. Singers are by nature migratory birds but actors, due to the limitations of language, are usually confined to their own bailiwicks. Madame Printemps is one of the few actresses who are at home in Paris, London and New York, playing in two languages. Most women of her advantages and versatility would acquire an artificial personality seventeen inches deep. She has remained devoted to simplicity and truth-telling. However, she is mentioned here for a special reason, one of her unconscious tricks. She has a way of asking questions as if they were preludes to anecdotes. You know the type of question: "Have you ever been to the top of the Empire State Building?" . . . "Do you think Budge could beat Perry?" Such questions usually mean, "I don't care what your response may be, I have a few tidbits on these matters and I propose to tell about them the minute you shut up." Well, Madame Printemps asks questions of this sort. You answer and then wait for her to open up. But imagine your surprise when it develops she has never been to the top of the Empire State Building and has no opinions on the

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

relative merits of the tennis stars. She was merely asking you. This is super flattery.

Emma Eames. "You have no idea how beautiful my voice was." Very stately, still beautiful for all her seventy-some years, she turned from the railing of the liner and regarded the other half of the conversation. "No phonograph records could do justice to my voice. A wonderful thing I had for a little while—and then it was gone." Never confusing candor with bragging, she succeeds in being so straight and honest that her conversation has a unique quality. Somerset Maugham immortalized this quality in "Jane."

Nathan Leopold. With so many worthies, there ought to be at least one criminal. But the great fact about criminals as conversationalists is this: they are willing to discuss anything under the sun but their own specialty. You would expect a violinist to mention music, a hairdresser permanents, a king to mention the prime minister's mean disposition. And they do. But all the criminals I have met—and I have met many—prefer to talk about their bridge-work or their dahlias. One of my duties as a young reporter was to see Nathan Leopold every afternoon and make a story out of his chatter. Bars between us, we used to gabble between four and five every day. He talked of his crime, the crimes of others, questions of technique, the different modes of capital punishment. The lethal chamber, he had almost decided, was his favorite. And, he added

THOSE WHO KNOW HOW

with a laugh, "Just like me to favor something they don't have in the state of Illinois." Now and then he greeted me with: "And what have *you* been doing?" I modestly turned this aside, feeling that nothing I had been doing could match what he had been doing.

CHAPTER SIX

WALLFLOWERS

Silence and modesty are very valuable qualities in conversation.—MONTAIGNE.

IN NEARLY EVERY GATHERING YOU SEE FIGURES THAT LOOK like dummies planted in chairs by the hostess to fool the other guests. If you look closely, you see that the dummies are really human beings who wet their lips, squirm, watch the others with exaggerated attention. If you address them, they turn pale and then produce a few stifled phrases.

The sufferings of the tongue-tied are unending: they never know when they will be called upon to speak. Those who are at ease with their intimate friends are often rendered speechless by the presence of a single stranger. In large groups they are lost and terrified. Secretly they compare themselves with glib talkers. The objects of their admiration and envy are usually the worst bores of the party.

Before the wallflowers finish reading this chapter they will probably decide that their situation is not so bad as it seems. But this is not a pep talk. There is no sure-fire method for turning frightened rabbits into saber-toothed tigers. Most tongue-tied people were probably not created

WALLFLOWERS

by nature to be brilliant conversationalists. All the same, there are ways by which they can overcome their handicap and turn themselves into *acceptable* conversationalists.



Figures that look like dummies planted in chairs by the hostess to fool the other guests . . .

Before we go into this matter, glib talkers will probably want to leave the room. They will be excused because there is nothing for them here. They can return for the next chapter which deals with problems peculiar to them.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

To the Timid

You say:

"I shut up like a clam in general company. I'm too timid to open my mouth."

Very well, why don't you capitalize on your handicap? Timidity may be a decorative quality rather than a fault. The fault consists in *concealing* timidity. This is what makes boors of us all at times. When we are flustered we force ourselves to become aggressive. Hoping to overcome a blush, we try a pop-eyed Mussolini glare. In moments of panic we storm around in a way that would scare off Genghis Khan. We would be fortunate if everyone said, "The poor sap's putting on an act to cover up his stage fright." But we usually cover up so well that the verdict is, "Better not ask that fellow again, he acts like the head of the Storm Troopers."

Relax. Go right on being timid. You might even confess it aloud occasionally. There is only one danger to this: if you avow it openly you might lose your timidity and thus lose one of your most attractive qualities.

Here is an example of a young man who capitalized on his timidity. He was a rewrite man on a newspaper and he wrote this note to the city editor, "When you talk to me in front of all the others, you get me nervous and flustered. Could I persuade you to write down your criticisms and instructions, at least for a few months? I could do better work. When I get used to the office, I'll get over this."

WALLFLOWERS

Was he thrown out on his ear? This, admittedly, was the first inclination of the city editor. He showed the note to the managing editor, saying, "This note came from a newspaperman. Did you ever see anything to beat it, a newspaperman too shy to talk?"

The managing editor laughed. "Well, there's something new. I should think you'd be glad to have one silent one. You've got such a hoot-owl atmosphere out there now. Is Mr. Shy good?"

"Sure, he's good, he'll be a star in a year—but imagine having to write notes."

"I'd rather write notes than have to bellow to make myself heard."

The city editor scribbled this note:

"For three months I'll write notes. After that you will be required to speak three or four sentences every day."

By the end of three months the timid rewrite man was a star performer on the typewriter. He was also contributing his full share of the spoken word. He was timid at first and the city editor later regretted he hadn't remained timid for the rest of his life. For it took only six months to turn him into a full-fledged hoot owl.

One consolation to the timid was pointed out by Nietzsche:

"If you want to prejudice a man in your favor you must become embarrassed before him."

Another was pointed out by Harold Nicolson:

"A man who is not shy before thirty will be a crashing bore before forty."

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

In response to all this you say:

"But I don't want to sit like a dummy in all conversations."

Of course not. You want a little fling at expressing yourself. Then start in by revising your general attitude. You cannot do this if you sit fidgeting in your chair trying to get up enough nerve to talk. Resolve, therefore, *in advance*, that in your next five conversations you will say no more than politeness requires. Say to yourself, at the beginning, "I have no intention of talking. No matter how much I feel like it I will keep still."

Now then. Instead of fretting at your own shyness, you will be free to listen to others. How can you listen when your ears are clogged with your own unspoken thoughts? Listen and watch!

You will discover that others show traces of timidity. Those who seem boldest have chinks in their armor. The gustiest talker present may by his very welter of words be concealing his lack of poise. You will discover that silence requires poise, too. The long-winded talker is not so admirable after all, is he? The others don't look enchanted as he races on for ten straight minutes with his tale of deep-sea fishing. The best talkers are often silent for long periods of time. You will discover that you are not an isolated case.

This leads to a definite attitude on conversation. When you yearn to become a good talker, why do you become too ambitious? You dream of turning overnight from a

WALLFLOWERS

timid person to a bold swashbuckler who will knock them over with brilliant anecdotes, witty retorts. You dream of dominating conversations, of holding large groups spell-bound. Perhaps you have been reading "success" books. Perhaps you have been seeing too many Noel Coward comedies or again reading books such as *My Flurried Years* by Daisy, Duchess of Snaffleshire, wherein all the characters flare up like Roman candles. (Don't forget that Daisy had years to imagine all those witty conversations.)

Bring your ambitions down to earth. Resolve to contribute a few well placed remarks, to tell an occasional little story when it fits into the general conversation.

But for the time being you are still in the listening stage. Make your listening count. Go back to Chapter Three. Concentrate on others and forget yourself for the time being.

When the five listening sessions are over, start to talk—with single words. Expand the single words into phrases, then into sentences. They should deal entirely with what others are saying . . . "Where did you see the bull fight?" . . . "What language were they speaking while all this was going on?" . . . "You said her dress was fantastic, what was it like?"

You can become so adroit at leading others that they will talk for your benefit. By imperceptible degrees your remarks will expand into a flow of sentences. If you renounce all grandiose ideas of conversation and set a reasonable goal for yourself, you will graduate, without no-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

ticing it, from a commentator on the conversation of others to a conversationalist in your own right.

If you dread the ordeal of entertaining, eschew such forms of hospitality as dinners. They require a more rigid conversational pattern. Try cocktail parties or invite swarms of people in for bridge or other games. On such occasions the conversation is more helter-skelter and imposes less of a strain on the host.

But there is one more objection:

"I'm often silent because I don't know what people are talking about. I've had a sketchy education and . . . as a matter of fact I feel like an ignoramus."

You are probably imagining things. A genuine ignoramus is usually not self-conscious. He is usually most eloquent on the subjects he knows least.

But suppose there are deficiencies in your education and you feel handicapped in conversation. This is certainly no anti-education tract and not a voice will be raised if you decide to fill in some of the blank spaces.

But whatever you do, do not drag your new-found learning into the conversation. It is only a background. Don't mention anything you have picked up until it's been in your head a long time. When you do use it, be sure it fits into the conversation. And be careful of the stilted phrases in "Better Speech" books. Better a thousand grammatical mistakes than one "genteel" phrase. Keep on being yourself even if you are a mastodon of learning.

WALLFLOWERS

In Defense of Ignorance

Only an intelligent man can enjoy the pleasures of ignorance. Faced with the fact that he cannot possibly compass all the world's learning, he accepts it with easy grace. Certain subjects he must know well to make a living. Others he pursues as avocations. He reads to keep himself informed on the background of the planet, human history, contemporary developments. But no matter how much he reads there are vast departments closed to him.

The intelligent man knows there are few pleasures like the pleasure of not having an opinion. Opinions require knowledge, specific data. When these are lacking, the intelligent man knows he can relax and let others parade their knowledge, real or fraudulent.

If, when he returns from South America, someone asks for "the real low-down on the Brazilian coffee situation," he is not ashamed to reply, "I don't know anything about coffee and I didn't look into it in Brazil. I was too busy toasting my toes on the beach."

Or, if someone asks his opinion of the latest "cancer cure" he will say, "I haven't any opinion. I know nothing about medicine."

But all of us are not intelligent. We are not satisfied with showing our legitimate knowledge. Perhaps we could be fairly entertaining on Washington gossip, horticulture or card sharks on ocean liners. But because we know these subjects we may consider them dull.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

We insist on spreading out, expressing opinions on matters of which we are totally ignorant. We would go to any ends to avoid saying, "Sorry but I know nothing about it. I have no opinion at all."

The man who got muddled on Balzac took the wrong tack. Instead of submitting to his wife's nagging he should have said, "Tootsie, I know nothing about Balzac except twenty lines I read in an encyclopedia. What's more, that's all I intend to know. There are plenty of things that interest me more. I think your friends are feather-brains for cluttering up an hour with a subject that really doesn't interest any of them."

Classroom recitations have no place in adult conversation. If a group of specialists in French literature want to talk about Balzac for an hour they probably do it because the subject is close to their hearts. When a general group, equipped with the dim memory of certain Balzac novels read in translation and a few tidbits picked up here and there, harps on Balzac for an hour under the notion the conversation is being conducted "on a really serious plane" the members of the group are probably very serious asses.

Informative conversation is usually a bore. It usually turns into a series of lectures. An egregious example was the woman who related in minute detail the contents of a biography of Marie Antoinette. She left off abruptly at the point where the Queen entered the Conciergerie. "Simply fascinating," she said, "I simply can't wait to find out how it is going to come out."

WALLFLOWERS

The only acceptable kind of informative conversation comes from those who possess original information or have a novel interpretation of known facts. And only when the other members of the party have shown a disposition to listen!

CASE HISTORY A

Monsieur N was a diplomat stationed for twenty years in The Hague. At a dinner party in London someone asked him a simple question about the Netherlands. He could have answered in fifteen words.

Instead he gave a lecture on the Netherlands, its fight to maintain democracy, its currency crises, its land reclamation projects, the position of the crown. This took twenty minutes.

Everything he had to say could have been fished out of an encyclopedia, supplemented by a magazine article that had appeared that very week.

If Monsieur N *had* to talk for twenty minutes on the Netherlands he might have filled up the time with gossip of the Dutch court, or any subject matter his listeners could not have got out of books. In twenty years he must have picked up something original and interesting.

While he was talking all the listeners looked as if they were thinking about cats smothering babies. But few would have admitted, even to themselves, that they were bored. Later they would say, "Oh, I say, he's frightfully int-restin'. You really learn something when he talks." Afterward they would avoid Monsieur N as if he had been a typhoid carrier.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

CASE HISTORY B

Charles D spent two years writing a history of the Opera. Everyone who met him during this time got caught in a flood of anecdotes. His friends went ga-ga with stories of Mozart and Maria Theresa, Nordica's thousand rehearsals for *Tristan and Isolde*, Oscar Hammerstein's rows. Charles introduced all sorts of minutiae and related it with gusto, with sweeping gestures.

Finally the book appeared. The victims solemnly swore never to read it. One who received a free copy broke the resolution: "I was running to catch a train and I grabbed it up by mistake for the new Wodehouse. I had nothing else to read. But you know, it's marvelous. Entertaining from first page to last."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the others in chorus.

The other victims broke down and read it. All agreed it was lucid, shrewd, entertaining.

Charles had made a pest of himself because he imagined that material suitable for a book was suitable for conversation.

Conversation and writing are worlds apart. The story or the exposition that makes a bright corner in conversation may be utterly useless in writing. Writers may instruct, but conversationalists never.

Virgin Tracts

I advocate a policy of aggressive ignorance. Instead of sitting meekly and letting the mind be stuffed with all sorts of data on subjects one has no mind to master, why not declare one's ignorance boldly and then stick to the program?

Someone must make a start so I shall compose mine:

WALLFLOWERS

"I am determined to maintain a dense, unshakable ignorance on the subject of horse racing, mathematics, aeronautics records, movie scandals, systems for beating roulette, the novels of Kathleen Norris, the doings of the Honorable Unity Valkyrie Freeman Mitford, 'the Aryan blonde.'

"I shan't carry it to extremes. There is a little room in my head for miscellaneous information. I'm willing to listen to a few tittles on puma hunting, stamp collecting, city planning, incunabula or batik work. But when a conversational marauder tries to hold me up for an hour's lecture, I draw the line!"

Everyone who doesn't want to be bored could make out a similar proclamation of ignorance. Thousands of American tourists who trot through the galleries of Europe every summer could say, "I never go to the galleries at home and I don't intend to here. And no talk about it, either!"

Thousands of concert-goers could announce definitely and flatly, "I loathe music. I won't talk about it and not wild horses will ever drag me to another concert."

Millions of women could say to their husbands, "You remember how Queen Victoria felt about dirty jokes? That's how I feel about business."

And a million husbands could rejoin, "Just how I feel about bridge and your battles with the cook."

No personality would be any the worse, I imagine, for preserving a few virgin tracts in the mind.

If the timid and "the ignorant" now feel better about things, the glib talkers may come back into the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE QUEEN PASSED THE SUGAR

THE HARSHTEST WORDS EVER SPOKEN ON THE SUBJECT OF anecdotes were spoken by Thomas De Quincey. "Of all bores whom man in his folly hesitates to hang," he said, "and heaven in its mysterious wisdom suffers to propagate their species, the most insufferable is 'the teller of good stories'—a nuisance that should be put down by cudgelling, by submersion in horse ponds or any other mode of abatement, as summarily as men would combine to suffocate a vampyre or mad dog."

Obviously De Quincey's words had not the slightest effect on his contemporaries or on succeeding generations. Anecdotalage is still a common malady. If it were confined to dolts and dullards, the remedy would be simple: To avoid the dolts and dullards. But it afflicts the wise, the clever, the intelligent. The autobiographical strain is strong within all of us. There's no hope of suppressing the urge to tell anecdotes. Our only hope lies in curtailed production.

An anecdote is generally a little splinter of autobiography. It interests the teller because he sees it in relation to the general contour of his life. It bores the rest of us because it has no relation to the rest of the conversation.

THE QUEEN PASSED THE SUGAR

One of the peculiarities of anecdotes is their static quality. They are like recitations, committed to memory, and discharged whenever the occasion arises. If you watch the most gifted anecdotist of your acquaintance you will discover that he has a static repertoire, that the phrases are set, the sequence of sentences seldom varies. The anecdotes are fixed between two tightly wound springs in his mind. Any good jar is enough to make them come popping out.

The confirmed anecdotist seems to have his whole autobiography compressed into these set stories. Even in cases where his repertoire is large, fifty or a hundred stories, you wonder how his life could have been so barren. Did nothing ever happen to him but the incidents embalmed in his anecdotes? The answer is, doubtless, "yes" but he has such an inelastic mind that he cannot find topics for conversation on the spur of the moment. He merely listens till something in the talk reminds him of one of his stories. Then he lets fly.

The man who has neither opinions, nor repartee, nor objective observations but only an infernal series of set pieces . . . "The time I shook hands with President McKinley . . ." "The time I won at Monte Carlo," etc.—deserves De Quincey's opprobrium.

One can always avoid the chronic anecdotist but the periodical anecdotist is a wily fellow. He goes for days without dragging in long stories. The customers feel he is cured. Then suddenly he goes berserk. He spins them out, one after another. His best friends are sure to hear his whole repertoire.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

There ought to be a special clinic for anecdotists. Even when they are fundamentally hopeless, something could be done to curtail their distribution. The worst cases could be instructed on how to keep a notebook wherein they could mark down past and potential victims. A sample page would read something like this:

My story about Charlie McQuiggle and the mongoose:

Already told to: Michael, Parson Strunk, the wall-eyed man at the garage, Aunt Harriet, five hoboes.

Impending victims: The Good Humors man, the rector of the Fourth Congregational, Nicholas Murray Butler.

The anecdotist by improving his distribution methods would be less of an annoyance. The victims would breathe easier if they felt sure they would hear each anecdote only once.

Anecdote is an infectious disease. The best-behaved will suddenly develop an urge for telling stories when others start it. We all of us have our blowsy moments and a blowsy audience sets us off.

"Did I ever tell you about the time the cook quit on me just before my dinner for the bishop?" someone says. Just let someone make a remark of this sort and we know the open season for anecdotes is upon us. Everyone has a cook or knows someone else's cook. If these cooks didn't quit two hours before a dinner for a bishop, they indulged in other quaint pranks. Everyone knows a bishop or knows someone who knows a bishop. Or perhaps there was a

THE QUEEN PASSED THE SUGAR

shocking story about a bishop in last week's *American Weekly*. Half an hour after the first remark you open your eyes and hear someone drooling, "Now the only bishop *I* ever knew . . ."

That night you'll dream about a cook chasing a bishop down the transept of a sausage machine.

One should think thrice before committing an anecdote. Does it have any relation to the general thread of the talk? Is it likely to interest others? Has any of the company heard it before? Will it help the conversation along or thrust it into a maze?

Let us suppose I am seized with a desire to tell the story about the time I talked for twenty minutes with the Queen of Denmark at a lunch counter. At a little wayside station in Germany I was perched on the stool next to the Queen's. I asked her to pass the sugar. She passed it. She made a remark about the weather. This started our twenty-minute gabble. The Queen didn't know I had penetrated her incognito.

God only knows why I insist on telling this story. I've told it a dozen times already. Nothing in it shows I am witty, clever or subtle. It does not indicate I move in exalted circles because the Queen would never have started it in the first place if she hadn't believed her incognito was perfect.

But anyway the people around me are talking about Denmark. The springs in my head holding that particular story have come loose and nothing short of an apoplectic



I talked for twenty minutes to the Queen of Denmark at a lunch counter.

THE QUEEN PASSED THE SUGAR

stroke can stop me. The least I can do is to think thrice. Have I ever told it before to anyone in this group? Answer "no."

While I was mulling it over the subject slipped around to Danish co-operatives. To drag the Queen of Denmark into the co-operatives would be like shouting "I like Turkish baths, too" when the preacher finished his sermon. So I wait, wondering how to wangle it. (This illustrates fairly, I think, the tricky mental processes of the anecdote addict.)

The talk shifts to the Danish government and finally the position of the monarchy. I could leap in here with, "Talking about the monarchy reminds me that . . ."

But after all I'm not with nitwits. The people around me have some sense of conversational propriety. Another minute goes by. Someone mentions the Silver Jubilee ceremonies in Copenhagen. While I am trying to tie this up with my incident, someone remarks, "It's really the most democratic court in Europe."

I am not sure if this is exact but I am sure it is my moment. I leap in. "I'll tell you something about the Queen of Denmark that illustrates . . ."

The most I had a right to expect was some show of interest. This I get. I take five minutes to tell my tale and realize I threw in too much dialogue. Then I toss the conversational ball back to the person who mentioned the Jubilee, "I didn't see the films of it," I say, "Did you?"

So, I have told my story again. My only excuse is that I conformed to the rules of fair play.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

In finishing off his subject let us admit that there are exceptions. We all of us have heard amusing anecdotes, some being recounted without rhyme or reason. We have not only been amused but we have added to our knowledge of human nature, strange places, alien customs.

But on the whole, telling anecdotes is a tiresome habit. It usually brands a man as a bore. If anecdotes must be told, the least the teller can do is make them brief, night letter length if possible. They should also be dated as recently as possible because for some inscrutable reason we are much more interested in what happened last night around the corner than what happened three years ago in Samarkand.

Finally, anecdotes should come singly, never in series. It is a conversational felony to say:

1. "Two funny things happened to me at the ranch. The first . . ." (No one will pay much attention to the first.)

2. "And then I had *another* experience." (Study the changing facial expressions around you; observe the watches coming out, the imaginary specks of dust being removed from sleeves.)

CHAPTER EIGHT

BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE

THE DICTIONARY, PUSSYFOOTING AS USUAL, DEFINES BORES as "tiresome persons; annoyances."

This is as inconclusive as a Japanese definition of "defensive warfare." If we defined bores as instruments of torture, menaces to society, parasites and egomaniacs, we might be nearer the truth.

The first quality of bores is, of course, talking too much. Usually their conversation turns on themselves, their history and adventures. The most trivial aspects of their existence, they are convinced, are certain to entertain others.

Grade A bores never listen to others. Grade B bores sometimes feign to listen. Both are incapable of interesting themselves in other human beings.

Then there are the less virulent types that become addicted to telling long stories, interrupting others, specializing in certain kinds of jokes, giving skits. Many of these can behave if they wish to.

In our gallery of bores we will look at many types. Not only the major types who are beyond hope but the part-time bores for whom first-aid remedies are suggested.

We shall start off with the lesser offenders:

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Temporary bores. Those who have completed a trip around the world, won the golf championship of Algonquin County, been victimized by counterfeiters. The remedy is to hear them out once and then say next time, "You told me that." In due time they'll recover.

Favorite Subject bores. Those addicted to raising chickens, attending first nights in the theater, turning in their cars every few months, etc., etc. Many with a minor activity, too intensely cultivated, fit into this category. There are also parents with their first-born (bright sayings, photographs etc.), social climbers, land sailors, Savile Row enthusiasts. The listener must remain constantly alert to steer the conversation away from the favorite subject.

"Dynamic" bores. These are strictly self-made bores. God made them shrinking and reticent. The high-powered salesmanship and personality books gave them an urge to become "dynamic." They address you with a kind of phony fervor as if they were selling wheat thinsies and you were showing "consumer resistance."

"Dynamic" bores at first acquaintance are usually as funny as Fanny Brice. Later they are only as funny as Dr. Goebbels.

If you fix them with your evil eye and say, "Relax!" they think you have been reading another kind of success book—*How to Mesmerize the Dynamic Personality*. If this fails I can only recommend two parts egg yolk, one part tomato catsup with a touch of arsenic, shaken well.

Mimicry bores. Their admirers say something like this,

BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE

"Helen is simply killing when she takes to telling coon stories. She's got hundreds of them." Try telling a few coon stories yourself until Helen loses her appetite for them.

Interrupting bores. They can't think up much for themselves so they break in when others are talking. If you say, "I was with a man named John Smith who lives in San Francisco," they say, "What! Not John Smith! Has he got red hair, a sort of small guy, wears a gray hat? . . . No? . . . Course, I haven't seen him in fifteen years." If you say, "The airplane flew over Tombstone, Arizona, on its way to Kansas City," the I.B. blurts out, "Oh, how *was* Tombstone? My cousin used to live there."

The remedy is a flinty look, no spoken response.

Still Water bores. They would have been normal if they hadn't heard the one about still water running deep. They put on a smirking, superior smile and listen industriously. The speaker is thrown off balance, sometimes, by the sight of the superior smile.

Ignore them. Remember this: to keep a superior smile going for hours on end requires so much current that it blows a fuse in the region above the eyes.

Irrelevant Fact bores. They get so fascinated by the minor details in their own stories that you think you'll never hear if the wolf ate Uncle Oscar.

The remedy for these bores is to help them along: "What did the wolf do then?" . . . "I'm getting anxious to hear

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

about Uncle Oscar." They're usually flattered into speed; eventually they get to the end.

Mysterious bores. By dropping their eyes and lowering their voices they create the impression that Hitler told them *all* about the new tanks. They need only a little persuasion to pass the *all* on to you.

Find a greasy spot in the wallpaper and think about begonias.

Subtle Joke bores. The kind who pause at odd corners in their stories to create the impression they have arrived at something inexpressibly delicate and comic. A few nervous listeners laugh because they're sure they missed something. Then at the end of the story, the story-teller lowers his voice and says in an offhand manner, "So Martin never came back."

Speak up loudly and say, "What was that joke all about?" The reply will be, "Oh, are you one of those people who have to have jokes diagrammed?" A few feeble souls will giggle. Reply, "Yes, please diagram it for me. No one here has the foggiest idea what it's all about."

Miscellaneous bores. They are always unpredictable, the kind that can be vastly entertaining on one occasion, stifling the next. For dealing with them, these suggestions:

Cultivate listlessness. Fail to meet the bore's eye when he comes to the climax of his speech.

Learn the key words of his favorite stories and keep the conversation away from the key words. (See Case History 2 below.)

BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE

Ask a lot of questions. Break in sharply with irrelevant comment.

Lead him down some by-way of his own narrative.

Interrupt. Tell stories yourself in such an aggressive manner he is forced to listen.

If these fail, create outside diversions. Drop things, go to the telephone. Make the dog bark. Get up and walk around. Fetch Junior's new mechanical kangaroo. The bore may get the idea you're too fidgety to make a good listener. He will probably save his own efforts for others and favor you with some of his lighter and more interesting pieces.

If one happens to be studying a foreign language, a bore can be a useful helper. While he is talking, translate his speech into Spanish, Finnish, Choctaw, as the case may be. With an interesting talker you could never keep your mind on the mechanics of speech. With a bore you can translate for long periods without having the foggiest idea of what lies behind the words. A college student took this suggestion with such reprehensible seriousness that he reported at the end of the year he had learned more Spanish in chapel than in the Spanish class.

So much for the less noxious types of bores. We come now to some grim cases:

CASE HISTORY I (GRADE A BORE)

The Princesse de L comes from an old American family, wealthy and influential ever since the railroads began gash-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

ing the western prairies with steel rails. The men in the family have not only turned the trick in Wall street but have been keen politicians. A few blundered off the main track into education and literature. The women have always been flighty and "brilliant," addicted to writing novels and memoirs, and fancying themselves as patronesses of the arts.

The Princesse's mother and father kept open house for all visiting celebrities. A much more difficult feat, they even trapped native specimens. The children of the family saw eminent scientists, surgeons, statesmen, men of letters, at close range, as other children see the butcher, the baker and the radio repair man. They got plenty of material for stories, skits, anecdotes. Conversation in the family circle was full of erratic allusions, weird phrases, elliptical stories. After an hour of this "brilliant" conversation, the ordinary mortal would have felt the air was saturated with mustard gas.

The youngest daughter married a German baron, divorced him and went to live in England where she cultivated "the right set." She was decorous, unostentatious, imperious to the point of rudeness. "The right set" approved of her and she had several chances for good marriages. But she preferred the Prince de L. She transferred her headquarters to Paris.

Now, at the age of forty, she knows New York, London, Berlin and Paris upside down. She can be boring with equal facility in three languages.

She has a sharp tongue, an eye that misses nothing, a seventh sense for perceiving the weak points in the armor of others. She is destitute of loyalty, she has no charity, she is convinced that good manners are suitable for peasants.

BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE

Finally she is one of the most ruthless egoists that ever inhabited the planet.

Nothing interests the Princesse except herself and the persons and things that reflect her personality. She talks incessantly, not only anecdotes of which she has an inexhaustible supply, but opinions, ideas, scandals, jokes, disquisitions on historical topics, anything that pops into her head. A great deal pops into her head.

Handsome, well-dressed, she commands attention. She is determined to keep it. It must be one of her innermost persuasions that people attend her parties and dinners just to hear her gabble. Her "brilliance" runs away with her so her eyes sparkle, her face becomes flushed, her head tilts in a pose she probably learned from Marlene Dietrich.

It is not always easy to understand what she is talking about because she cultivates a kind of throaty inarticulation she acquired in England. She tosses in French and German words, she makes mysterious allusions to persons and events, assuming that all will understand, hoping that no one will. The listener must strain his ears to get the wit, the *mot juste*, the spicy revelation. There are plenty of people who rebel at the strain and so avoid her.

She doesn't mind because her houses in Paris and London, her good food, her flocks of celebrities, lure new customers. Her soirees are as popular as the late Daddy Browning's adoption parties.

The Princesse is so clever she sometimes starts a story right in the middle:

"Most extraordinary it was! When I spied the moth-eaten creature right at my own table I wondered how he had got there. It was too thick! When he made the remark about Anthony Eden I knew I was in the *pétrin*. So . . ."

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

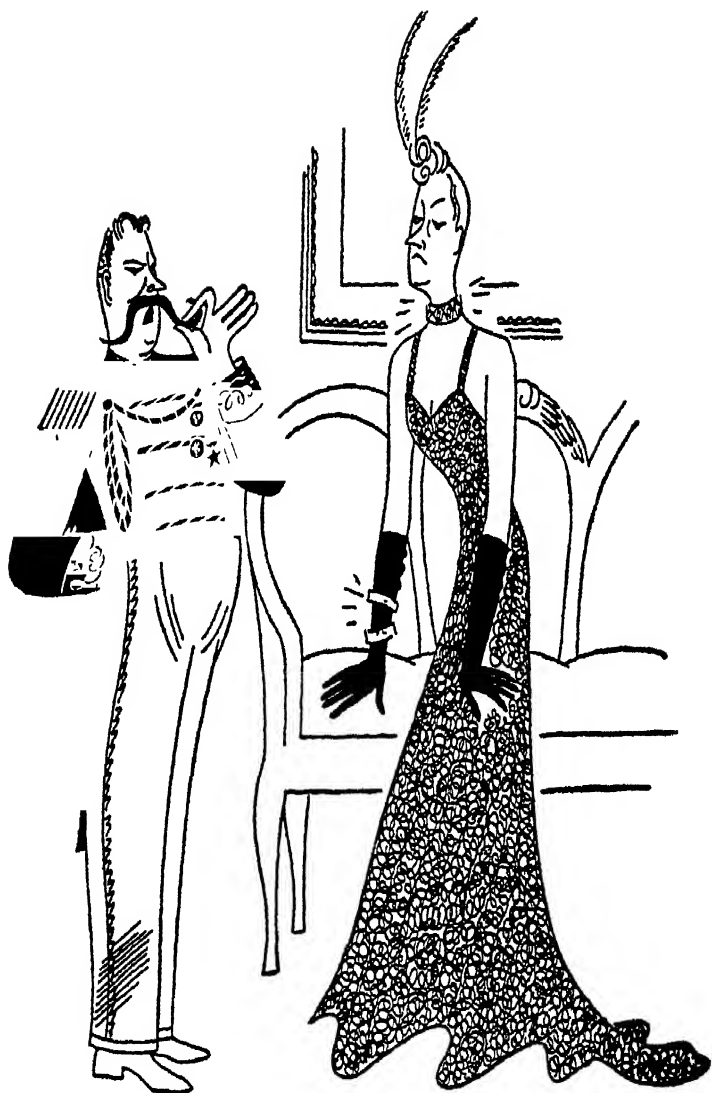
The Princesse often tells stories just as confusing; I quote and cherish this one because it was one of the few times she got caught by the heels. A testy old general put up his hand and said, in a voice he had probably once used to "squads right": "Princesse, what are you talking about? What was extraordinary? Who was at your table? Why was he moth-eaten? What did he say about Anthony Eden? What does *pétrin* mean?"

Unabashed, still sprightly and radiant, the Princesse threw her gears into reverse, tossed off a few explanations, and then plunged ahead.

She didn't stop for half an hour. A rough inventory at the end indicated she had told four screaming stories (I didn't know the people she was talking about and so didn't scream), referred to the Maharajah of Nepal, Mussolini, and Milan Stoyadinovitch with an air that implied she knew all their secrets, quoted Voltaire and James Russell Lowell, made brief excursions into Chinese painting, women's hats, chess, Moorish architecture. She ended up by reading three paragraphs from an article she had written for an English magazine, the article being excavated from the depths of her handbag.

When she talks, the Princesse's eyes sweep the faces of her audience like anti-aircraft beacons. If she sees one pair of dull or wandering eyes, she concentrates on them like a sorceress. If the eyes don't respond she treats their possessor with studied rudeness during the rest of the evening.

When someone else talks the Princesse looks into space and drums on the arms of her chair. Sometimes she coughs. If there is a moment's silence, she tries to crash in with something of her own. If the devices fail—they often do—



"Princesse, what are you talking about?"

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

she assumes an injured expression and meditates on something far away. She has the air of a woman in a trance.

CASE HISTORY 2 (GRADE B BORE)

"Did I ever tell you the story about the wrist watch?"

It was four in the morning, the hour when the energies reach their lowest depths. I hadn't the spirit to put up a fight.

I looked over at Harcourt who had taken the last telephone call from Marseilles and was stretching himself with one foot on his desk preparatory to a long bout of talking. His face was hidden by a green lamp shade. I could see only his parted lips.

This was in Paris as you can guess. If Paris for you means the Ritz bar, the Champs-Élysées on a golden day in summer, the American Express, the Louvre, the rose windows of Notre Dame, you have no idea what Paris can be like when you work from midnight till eight in the morning through the dreary, dripping days of winter.

All night the telephone buzzed from Rome, Madrid, Berlin, Belgrade, Warsaw, Brussels. Greta Garbo had been seen skating in Zurich, baking biscuits in Stockholm at the same hour. (It would be definitely established later that she was making a picture in Hollywood.) A French peasant had kept his wife and two servants chained up in a dog house. King Peter of Yugoslavia got a teddy bear for Christmas. Mussolini was putting on another of his "I love Peace but . . ." skits. Americans insisted on having these tidbits with their morning prune juice.

The business had a certain comic value but it was canceled by Harcourt who was one of God's prime bores.

His idea of conversation was a series of anecdotes told by

BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE

himself. He parceled out his whole forty-three years into anecdotes. "Did I tell you about the spy in Cairo?" . . . "Did I tell you about the time I met King Albert?" . . . "Did you hear about the shirt studs in Melbourne?"

He had been in the British Navy during the war and this provided the bulk of his stories.

His voice sounded again, timidly insistent. "I don't think I ever told you about the wrist watch."

Looking back I couldn't remember anything about a wrist watch. "I don't think so," I said, resigned to hearing it out.

"Well, in 1917 our outfit was stationed near Falmouth. One night . . ."

I remembered it! Furtively I took a card out of my drawer. It told me that Harcourt had told me that story eleven times and was now on the twelfth performance. The story was simply this: Harcourt was on a torpedoed convoy ship. He found himself in the water and by means of a raft and a buoy had kept afloat for six hours till another ship picked him up. In one version he had slept, in another he had fainted.

Each time it began differently. "Did I tell you about the torpedo?" . . . "Did I tell you about my experience in Falmouth?"

And now the twelfth version began with a wrist watch. The watch had never stopped while he was in the water. He still wore it.

I learned that there were certain key words that could get him going. "Torpedo," of course, was one. "Shipwreck" was another. It became a game to deflect him when he approached one of the incendiary words. Although I had deflected him a score of times, had told him curtly that I

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

knew the story, had left the room abruptly, I heard every story in his repertoire at least four times.

In talking about Harcourt I don't want to exaggerate. He was a decent human being with all sorts of attractive qualities. I would rather have the memory of an amicable association with him than nine-tenths of all the "clever" conversation I have swallowed. But no instinct of charity could gloss over the fact he was a major bore. Some of his greatest exploits of story-telling brought physical misery to his hearers.

I used to wonder how he could have compressed his whole life story into a score of anecdotes. One explanation was that he had a lazy mind and a poor memory. When he returned from a trip he had many little tidbits about his adventures. But as the days went by he would forget some and then reduce the rest of the crop to two or three. Finally it would decline to one—not necessarily the best, or, from his point of view, the most glamorous. It was as if his subconscious mind had said, "I shall let this story about the toothpick and the policeman stand for the first six months of the year. It was undoubtedly the outstanding event of this period."

CASE HISTORY 3 (GRADE B BORE)

Very often on meeting Harvey G people remark, "That's the most interesting man I ever met. I hope to see him again."

There's every reason in the world why Harvey G should be an interesting conversationalist. His profession of mining engineer has taken him all over the world, not only the centers of population, but outlandish spots no one else ever heard about. He has used his eyes and stocked his

BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE

brain. He can jump from Jainism to Mayan architecture, from bacteriology to British social security schemes, without batting an eyelash.

His job has given him plenty of time for thinking and reading. He is in the habit of saying, "The great triumph of my life was to be satisfied with my own company." Why he ever strayed away from anything he likes so much is a question that must beset every listener after the first half hour.

Harvey's conversation technique is simple. He may have picked it up from reading about French salons. "Sit down," he says. "Let me pour you a drink. And have a cigar. I get them from Havana. A friend has them made specially for me."

A few hours later you look at the empty glass and the cigar stub and think of the offerings the ancient Egyptians used to put in the coffins of their honored dead.

Harvey prides himself on his fairness, so more than likely he will ask you a few questions. "Did you make money out of that Paramount stock?" . . . "How's that friend of yours . . . the one from Louisville?" Or, if there is nothing of more recent interest he will ask you if you like *L'Éducation Sentimentale* as well as *Of Human Bondage*.

That's the end for you. You have had your drink, your cigar, your fifty or sixty words.

Harvey stretches himself in his comfortable chair, clears his throat, looks at the ceiling and lets the clutch out.

Harvey's programs are varied. If you get a little on Bolivian birds at the beginning, you aren't surprised to have the same program contain something on Ford Madox Ford, Danish food, anesthetics, frauds in the fur business, double-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE .

entry bookkeeping, Ming vases and somebody's concerto for ocarina and five saucepans.

Harvey likes instructive conversation. Rarely does he mention himself.

A close business associate of his said, "If I were forced to write his obituary, I could be sure of only three things, that he was born in Batavia, Illinois, that he had hives once from eating artichokes, that he flunked geometry in high school."

Coda

In describing the last three bores I have no intention of putting them down as representative types. They are merely given as individuals, extraordinarily gifted in their specialty. Each has the power and intensity of five or six minor bores rolled into one.

To understand a type, one should examine the best examples. Greek architecture is much clearer after one has seen the Parthenon.

The three combine the chief qualities of the breed. They all refuse to listen—genuinely listen. The two men sometimes make a pretense (hence their rating as Grade B bores); the Princesse never does. All are too egocentric to be interested in the affairs of others.

Two are mild-mannered, the third is ruthless and sometimes rude.

They are, all three, addicted to telling stories.

Is this kind of bore beyond redemption?

The sad answer is: usually yes.

BORES: THEIR CAUSE AND CURE

The problem for the rest of us is not how to save *them* but how to save ourselves from the damaging effects of being treated like pieces of blotting paper.

So, unless we happen to be tied to such a bore through marriage, business, safe-cracking or other circumstances beyond our control, the only solution is to chuck the fellow finally, definitely, brutally—and think no more about it.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PIG'S TAIL AND OTHER MATTERS

CORAL'S CLEVER BUT I ALWAYS COME AWAY FEELING LIKE a worm."

This sentence, spoken in a plaintive voice, floated out of a stateroom on the Broadway Limited. I didn't see the speaker and I heard no more about Coral. But I could imagine the whole story. So can you.

Conversation is one of our chief weapons in the world but unfortunately many use it like a bayonet or worse, like a bludgeon. You know the people addicted to such remarks as "Believe me, I showed her up!" . . . "I laid him out in lavender." . . . "I didn't let them think they were putting anything over on me." Fearful of being done in, pretending to be very bold, they run around stabbing and cudgeling, leaving a trail of enemies behind them, wondering in the end how they could be so disliked.

Only a superheterodyne optimist could say that we should always be kind and considerate to our fellow men. Sometimes it is necessary to fight, to injure, to be rude and insulting. But we should never do these things except with our eyes wide open. It makes it easier to bear the consequences of our acts.

THE PIG'S TAIL AND OTHER MATTERS

A clever man with a bayonet tongue should realize that he, too, is a good target. If he has a tough skin, so much the better. If a tender one, he shouldn't be surprised if he has to carry his vanity around in a sling for days at a time.

A man with a bayonet tongue usually fancies himself as a cynic. In reality he is usually the most innocent sort of optimist. He feels sure that his thrusts will alter the character of friends and enemies. The reformer's spirit is so strong within him that he cannot resist the opportunity to expose humbug, track down errors in logic, correct grammatical mistakes, trap others in their lies.

If the lies, errors, grammatical mistakes and humbug did any harm he would have a right to intervene. But when they are harmless, as they often are, the reformer offends others merely to satisfy his own petty vanity. The least he can do is to refrain from whining when he gets what is coming to him.

So much for the deliberate aggressor. Let us turn to the inept conversationalist who offends others without intending it. When he makes acrid remarks about certain races, he never dreams, of course, that there may be members of such races in the room. He may express the opinion that all actors are crackpots and then turn to the beautiful woman across the table for support. He finds it an amazing coincidence that she is an actress.

With his own friends the inept conversationalist is only a little better. He avoids gross insults of course, but he offends in small and subtle ways. One woman still smarts

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

from his remarks on thick ankles. Another woman remembers a year afterwards how scathingly he showed up her stupidity at bridge. A none-too-prosperous male friend tries to forget certain stinging comments on "those who buy cheap liquor."

Inept conversationalists not infrequently confess their fault. "Oh," they say, "I'm *always* putting my foot in it." Do they say this with humility, with contrition? Do they show any inclination to reform? Oh never! They say it with a fat, self-satisfied smile. They pamper their little vice. Until inept conversationalists leave off their Cheshire-cat confessions, there is not much hope for them.

If they have the will to reform they ought to take a holiday from reckless chatter and study the sensibilities of others. It needs no profound study, merely a glance at the surface of human behavior, to know what is likely to offend others. When the glib talker has learned his lesson he should stop and reflect before perpetrating his "witty sallies," particularly all those sentences beginning, "Well, to be quite frank with you . . ."

Candor

Clumsy conversationalists often defend themselves by boasting of their candor. You have met the man who says, "Well, you know me, I just out with it without thinking." Or, "I can't be bothered covering up my opinions, I believe in frankness."

Anyone afflicted with this gift of candor has no reason

THE PIG'S TAIL AND OTHER MATTERS

to boast. It reveals the clodhopper mind. There are many times when candor is called for, but many more times when silence is infinitely the greater virtue.



Encourage her to enter into her next hat-buying expedition in a more reflective spirit.

If your wife buys an atrocious hat and asks your opinion, you might conceivably do her a good turn by saying that feathers aren't for her. Or, more ruthlessly (if she happens

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

to be an obdurate, perverse woman) that feathers make her look like a hag. It might encourage her to enter into her next hat-buying expedition in a more reflective spirit. In any case, if you are obliged to be seen in public with the offending hat, you have some rights in the matter.

But suppose a stranger at a party asks your opinion of her new hat. To your shocked gaze it looks like a pancake griddle garnished with shaving brushes. But the stranger is fishing for a compliment. Why make an enemy? You have probably no chance of reforming her and no one will blame you for her eccentric tastes.

If people tell harmless lies to bolster up their own ego why expose them? You can learn as much about another man from listening to his lies as to his truths. If you really have a shrewd and penetrating mind, you won't care if a liar takes you for a gullible person. If you have an innocent mind, and are trying to conceal it, by all means expose the liars. Only the smart ones will know why you do it.

Candid people often endow themselves with a certain Galahad quality. They cannot tell a lie. Tell a secret to a Galahad and he will proceed to divulge it. His defense will be, "I can't lie and besides it was so silly concealing a little thing like that."

It was silly to him but a matter of vital importance to you! Galahads usually have a rush of honesty to the head when someone else's welfare is concerned. In their own affairs they manage to reconcile discretion and honor.

THE PIG'S TAIL AND OTHER MATTERS

Sarcasm

Another trait of the clumsy conversationalist is sarcasm. This again betrays a maladroit mind. The man who habitually deals in sarcasm cannot cope with a situation or argument as a whole; he always fastens on a single phase.

For sarcasm is usually a little fragment of the truth removed from its setting to incite sharp and immediate reaction. It amuses us in the same way as those scenes in the animated cartoons wherein the pig's tail leaves the pig and leaps into the air to thrash a big, bad wolf. There was nothing funny about the pig's tail while it stayed where it belonged. There was nothing funny about the remark that incited the sarcasm until it was snatched from its context and held up to isolated inspection.

Sarcasm is sometimes justified because it really does clarify an idea by removing it from useless wrappings. Sometimes a booby's speech doesn't deserve consideration as a whole. One sarcastic jibe at its most ludicrous phase does the trick.

But on the whole, sarcasm means taking a cheap advantage.

CHAPTER TEN

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

IN OTHER CHAPTERS WE HAVE DEALT WITH BORES, ANECDOTARDS, culture fiends and others who do not merely interfere with a conversation but blow it to smithereens.

This chapter deals with lesser offenders. Many conversationalists combine great virtues with petty but annoying faults. Their eccentricities, mannerisms, affectations are an irritation to others. Clumsy rather than perverse, they deflect a conversation from its natural channel, they change its tone, they slow it up. They are the monkey-wrench throwers.

Monkey-wrench throwers are usually amenable to reason. But no one applies reason. Their friends don't feel like saying, "Charlie, you're perfect until you start on those Chinese stories." . . . "Susie, if you keep on saying, 'now another thing' there's going to be a divorce in your family."

Let us get down to some varieties of monkey-wrench throwing:

Dialogue

"So he said, 'Come along.'"

"And I said, 'I simply can't.'"

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

"And he said, 'Why not?'"

"'Why?' I said, 'because I made a date with Louella.'"

Those who use too much dialogue are among the most tiresome talkers on the planet. Constant reiteration of "I said" and "he said" leaves the listener too befuddled to follow the thought. The above sentences could better be put into narrative:

"He urged me to come but I explained I had an engagement."

Here is another example:

"So Jim said, 'No, let me pay for it' and then Joe said, 'No, you paid for it the last time' and then Jim began to sulk and said, 'You're always making the same remark. Now let it go and I'll take care of it.' Then Joe tried to catch the waiter's eye and he said, 'Absolutely not. This one's on me.' Right here Jim got raving. 'You've got the manners of a peasant,' he said."

Why not this way:

"Joe and Jim had a wrangle about who should pay for lunch check. It ended with Joe shouting, 'You've got the manners of a peasant.'"

It takes seventy-six words to tell it in dialogue, twenty-five in narrative. The narrative is much clearer. Only one sentence is quoted verbatim and that because it reveals something about the speaker.

Edith Wharton made the observation that good novelists use dialogue sparingly—only when it is desirable to tell the

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

exact words spoken by a character. The same holds for conversation.

Mimicry

Mimicry bores have already been mentioned. Under this heading we include the minor mimicry addicts who are never boring but mildly pathetic.

The ability to imitate is a delightful asset to a conversation. Those who can tell what the janitor said to the washerwoman with all the inflections of Negro and Swedish accents know how to make a story swim better. If they can recreate Jewish pants merchants, Irish ward heelers, Italian fish peddlers they can entertain people with the flimsiest little incidents.

But if they do it to excess, they will get the reputation for being entertainers. People will begin saying, "He's marvelous. We'll have him to the big party. But as for this little dinner tonight . . . no, I don't feel up to skits."

Conversation should never sound like paid, professional entertainment.

Dragging a Red-Haired Harridan Across the Trail

"I got into New York and then this man took me to dinner at the Crillon."

Well, *what* man?

Some conversationalists have a perfect mania for mystery and anonymity. Instead of being forthright about it they compromise by using, "this man," "this certain per-

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

son," "these people," "somebody I know." The illiterates say, "I heard it from a certain party."

If the story is long there is usually a confusion of pronouns. To avoid saying "he" or "she" the speaker says, "So this friend telephoned me and said . . . they said they couldn't go and so of course I had to phone to someone else and this other person I phoned said that . . ."

You, the listener, can't tell if its Shirley Temple, the Duke of Windsor or the Sing-Sing baseball team. What's more, you don't care.

Then there is the opposite side of the picture, the speaker who insists on identifying each minor character in his adventures. You get something like this:

"I was going to the bank when who should I meet but Marty Harrison. You've heard me mention Marty. Used to be at Gimcracks when I was there. Marty's always got the latest news. Got a sort of nose for news if you get what I mean. Sort of runs in the family. His two half brothers, Joe and Sylvester, are reporters. Anyway, Marty, he's Barbara's cousin by the way, told me that Blue Baboon Pretzel debentures are due for a rise."

Nothing would have been lost if the speaker had kept Marty out of the conversation. This would have covered it:

"On my way to the bank I met a friend who told me Blue Baboon Pretzel debentures are due for a rise."

The New Testament is full of parables that describe the characters simply as the Poor Man, the Sinner, the Good

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Samaritan. The Good Samaritan, described by Marty's friend, would probably come out like this:

"Did I ever tell you about Smulkins—Ike Smulkins? Never *heard* of him? The one they call the Good Samaritan? Well, listen, last week he hops into his Studebaker, Ike did, all set to get to Jericho by seven. He had a date with Ethel Olson, you know her, don't you? God, you don't know anybody! Ethel used to sing over MGYR, torch songs and all that. Well anyways, Smulkins gets a blowout, see, and has to stop at a garage. The guy that runs it . . . what *was* his name? . . . funny, it was right on the tip of my tongue . . . wait a minute! Hank Bascom, that's it. Hank tells Smulkins there's a guy in the back room that got banged up by a coupla thugs. So Smulkins goes into the back room and comes out again. 'That guy needs more'n a rest,' says he. 'Here's a fiver. Send the mug to the hospital and I'll foot the bill.'"

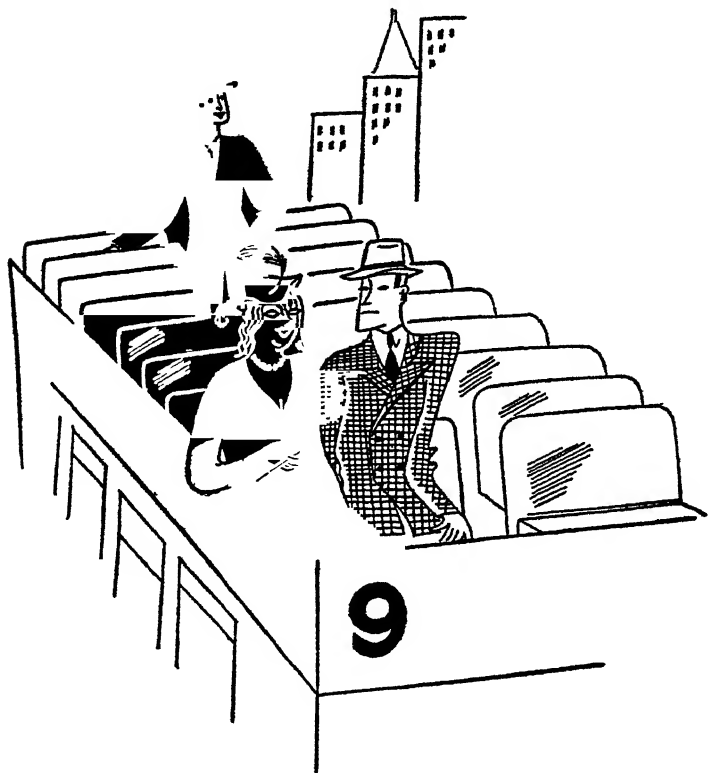
There are two ways to introduce characters into conversation. One is to be crisply anonymous: "A friend of mine told me that . . ." "A red-headed harridan I met on the bus . . ." If for any reason you see fit to withhold names, be bold about it. It's the evasive phrases that irritate your listener.

But suppose you wish to identify the characters in your tale. Don't begin, "This man that took me to lunch." Start right off at the beginning:

"I had a letter to a man named George Redwood in Cleveland. He is a lawyer, writes articles for law journals

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

and he's something of a golf expert. He's about thirty-five, not married. When I got to Cleveland, I sent the letter.



"A red-headed harridan I met on the bus . . ."

The next morning he telephoned and asked me to lunch and then to play golf." (A woman, of course, is telling this.)

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Or:

"You've heard me mention Tony Gorham who was my classmate in college. He has just busted into the movies. When I was in Hollywood I phoned him. He was having a party and invited me over. That's how I met William Powell and Lily Pons."*

Whatever you intend to tell about George Redwood or Tony Gorham, your audience will have some notion of what it's all about.

When should characters be unidentified? When should you mention their names and give a brief account of their works and pomps?

In general, characters entering the conversation briefly and casually should be left nameless: "A friend of mine told me the other day . . ." "The butcher says that . . ."

If the speaker intends to refer to the characters again and again, or if the incident is important, they should be identified at the offset.

But suppose you want to relate an incident involving constant references to a man whose name you do not wish to reveal. Then be forthright about it. Don't hedge. Don't say, "This man . . ." Say, "This involves a man whose name I can't reveal. I'll call him Jimmy to keep things straight."

* This is a lie, of course. The speaker saw William Powell and Lily Pons at the Brown Derby. But even lies can be arranged in workmanlike order.

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

"Now Another Thing"

Clarence has just told Maudie he will have no more burnt toast for breakfast. It makes him sick to his stomach. His nerves cannot stand the sound of the morning scraping. He paid ten dollars for a toaster that rings a warning bell but Maudie lets it go on ringing as if it were the Fuller Brush man at the front door. His mother never let toast burn. It's all disgusting.

These are fighting words but Maudie might have absorbed them to her own benefit. She might have been frightened into a reform.

But Clarence goes on to say, "Now another thing. I'm sick of picking up after you. You're too slatternly. You spill powder all over the bathroom floor. You let the cat play with my shirts. I could swear you use my razor for sharpening pencils."

Clarence has covered too much ground at one session. Maudie merely concludes he's peevish, that his various complaints spring from last night's highballs. She thereupon ignores all the complaints, including the one on ebony toast.

"Now another thing" is a favorite expression with people caught in intense situations. They ought to remember that the moment they wander away from the central theme of the conversation, they are losing ground and flirting with defeat.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Affectations

You have met people who, after spending a summer in Europe, a guidebook in one hand, a phrasebook in the other, return to America and shower the landscape with foreign words and phrases. They suffer from *Weltschmerz*, they adore *Wienerkaffee*, they yearn for *dolce far niente*.

Most of them get over it but those who persist might reflect on the following:

Peppering the speech with foreign words and phrases is one of the marks of a conversation snob.

Good linguists can usually keep their languages apart.

In America few people can get the sense of a sentence that contains such words as *corrida*, *Weltanschauung*, *béguin*, *oi sunetoi*.

Listeners are usually more irritated than impressed.

"But," someone remonstrates, "there *are* certain words in foreign languages that have no English equivalents."

There are. If you are talking about *cantes flamencos*, *hors d'oeuvres*, or *tre ore*, you must use these words. They are standard labels for unique things.

Certain other words such as *putsch*, *simpático*, *laissez-faire* have crept into English usage. Anyone has a right to use them and those who are too lazy to consult the dictionary have no right to complain.

There are plenty of words possessing subtle nuances that cannot be translated (*abrupti* and *chétif* are examples from French, *gemütlichkeit* and *liebenswürdig* from German).

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

Does this mean we have an excuse to drag them into English speech?

It does not. Leave them where they belong and find cruder English equivalents. There's always this consolation, that for every word that cannot be translated from French to English, there are a dozen that cannot be translated from English to French. With German the ratio is even higher. English is an incredibly rich language. Those who speak it have no more right to begrudge other languages their niceties than a millionaire has a right to begrudge a factory worker his 1930 Ford.

When we must use foreign words how shall we pronounce them? As they are pronounced in the land of their origin? If we do, we shall be accused of putting on airs. Shall we anglicize them completely? Then we shall be accused of ignorance. In discussing French words which provide the major migration into English, H. W. Fowler recommends a compromise. He points out, and quite rightly, that to toss a French word or phrase into an English sentence, pronouncing it as the French do, means a complete readjustment of the throat muscles.

Few can slip from one accent to another; the French words affect the English intonation and vice versa. Fowler's solution is, therefore, to make acknowledgement to the foreign language by an approximately correct pronunciation without disturbing the flow of words.

This seems a good solution for all foreign words, no matter what the language, entering into English speech. Pro-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

nounce them as correctly as possible without spraining the tongue and throat muscles. But the problem should not come up too often.

Other Affectations

Many people make exhibitions of themselves without the help of a foreign language. They achieve it by mangling English words and adopting eccentric pronunciations.

A short stay in England is a snare for many Americans. They like to say "goods van" for freight car, "wireless" for radio, "geyser" (pronounced geezer) for hot-water heater. They pronounce "trait" as "tray" and give an *sh* instead of *sk* sound to "ski" and "schedule."

A schoolteacher I once knew cultivated a speech that sounded like a bassoon in a chicken coop. Her natural form of expression was flat middle western. Into this she kneaded a number of expressions she must have picked out of Scottish novels such as "It will be no amiss to ask you a few questions." She pronounced down as "doon" and dead as "day-ed." And of course she trotted out all the subjunctives in her grammar: "If he be all right . . ." "If Robert arrive on time."

These were only a few of her caprices with words. No one had the foggiest idea of what she was talking about; everyone's attention was focused on her syntax and pronunciation. People listened with the same astonishment they would have shown if the duchess had appeared in the opera's diamond horseshoe clad in a pink bathing suit.

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

Misplaced pedantry isn't the only form of conversation snobbery. A young man who probably did very well in Professor Perkins' English IV likes to say "I ain't," "I knowed him," "them things," "I went for to see him." These expressions, he thinks, sound virile and picturesque when spoken by a rustic.

Some forms of speech like some vintages of wine don't travel well.

Another misguided soul, a frisky business man, specialized in mispronunciations. He said "Minneapolis," "mizzled" for misled, "proo-ins" for prunes. When it became fairly certain that he was doing it not from ignorance but from coyness, I asked him why.

"I like to make people laugh," he said.

That being the case, I laughed.

Still another sinner cultivated an eccentric vocabulary. In a ten-minute conversation he got off "varlet," "streel," "glowpering," "rubescent." Some of his words were obsolete, some "literary," and some he confected himself.

Good conversationalists, on the whole, prefer to be interesting for what they say rather than how they say it. Their style is effective but not obtrusive. This does not mean that picturesque expressions, new slang, invented words, are not desirable. Very often they contribute to a good style.

But if the audience is kept so busy remarking one's affectations, outlandish phrases, eccentric syntax, it is certain that the speaker's remarks won't make any impression. An

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

eccentric conversationalist has the same charm as a host who puts firecrackers under the table to stir things up. Once is enough.

General and Specific

Some conversations are by nature casual, random gossip affairs that deal with personalities and specific incidents. Others deal with ideas, abstractions, general observations.

There is no reason why a conversation shouldn't be a little of each, no reason why one kind of conversation shouldn't switch over to the other kind. But people who habitually change the tone of a conversation ought to think twice before attempting it.

Why? Because people engaged in random gossip don't usually welcome a flood of big ideas. Because people dealing with ideas usually resent a flood of small talk.

Let us take an example of a specific conversation. Several amateur photographers are exchanging notes on their experiences, on types of cameras, cost of enlargements, tricks of technique. They seem to be enjoying themselves. But one man breaks in with, "Well, photography has a long way to go before it can be considered a fine art." He gives his reasons, compares photography with painting and then plunges into a monologue on aesthetics.

No one said, of course, that photography was a fine art. The speakers merely wanted to be left in peace to discuss Leicas and ways of sneaking up on Baltimore Orioles. But one man insists on switching the conversation from the

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

specific to the general. The others don't welcome the change. They behave as if a croquet player had invaded a golf course shouting, "I don't want you to play this game any more. You must come and play mine."

And now an example of general conversation. A biologist, a physician and four laymen are discussing multiple births. The ratio of twins to normal births is such and such. The ratio of triplets is . . . Multiple births have a tendency to run in families. Women may take out twin insurance. A department store advertises to women: "Buy your layette from us in advance and if it's twins, we will present you with another outfit." And so on. The conversation is all impersonal. The participants are inevitably reminded of anecdotes but they realize the subject is not dealing with individual cases. So anecdotes are suppressed. One woman is the mother of twins but nobly holds her peace. Another woman has less sense. Her attention wanders. "Oh, did I tell you my janitor's wife had twins last week? They're darling!" This silly interruption has changed the tone of the conversation. No one wanted to hear about the janitor's twins but four people wanted to hear what the biologist was going to say on types of twins.

This business of distinguishing between the general and the specific may be the most subtle trap of conversation. Many who are keen enough to avoid every other blunder seem perfectly capable of dragging pointless anecdotes into general discussions or of turning pleasant gossip sessions into philosophic inquiries.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

CASE HISTORY A

Claire G, wife of a professor, is a pleasant, attractive woman of forty, who has been a great aid to her husband because of her ability to get on with people of all ages and classes. She has a radiant line of chatter that is particularly effective in large, disjointed affairs such as cocktail parties. Her dinners, however, are another matter. Her husband has taught himself not to wince when she throws a monkey wrench into the conversation.

Here is one of her typical performances:

Ten guests sat down to Claire's table. Two had just returned from Sweden and the professor questioned them on their impressions. These evolved into a general discussion of Swedish social progress, eight of the guests taking part.

Suddenly one guest remarked, "I'm sick of hearing Sweden held up as a Utopia. To me the Swedes are a complacent, sterile people. Their sense of security deadens their senses. They're only half alive!"

At this, a vigorous, passionate discussion broke loose. The man who made the incendiary statement was challenged right and left.

During a momentary lull, Claire chirped up. "Yes, indeed, the Swedes are a very curious people. . . ."

Everyone turned to her expectantly. That is, everyone except her husband who became suddenly engrossed in a pear salad. How would Claire amplify her statement that the Swedes are a curious people? By showing that Swedes have traits found in no other people? By proving, for instance, that all Swedes smash their coffee cups after drinking from them, that their trains have no roofs, that they

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE MACHINERY

never wash behind their ears on Thursdays, that they teach their cats to roller skate?

With eight pairs of eyes fastened on her (the professor by this time was trying to scratch the satsuma pattern off the salad plates) Claire smiled brightly and repeated, "Yes, indeed, the Swedes are a curious people. Now you take my maid, for instance. She does the most fantastic things."

She recounted five incidents in the life of the maid. One was calling the telephone company to demand bells that sounded like chimes.

Claire seemed surprised that the guests lost all interest in their discussion on Sweden.

CASE HISTORY B

Agatha D must have received many compliments during her thirty-four years, but the only one that went to her head was "she never discusses personalities, even herself."

Long before this remark was passed on to her, Agatha probably had inclinations toward abstract conversations. She is as cold as Craig's wife and her various avocations such as horses, Mexican pottery, ski-ing in fashionable resorts, luring men on and freezing them away, are enough to exhaust her passions. She keeps a glacial gulf between herself and all other human beings. It is explicable that discussions about personalities don't interest her. But until the fatal "compliment" her conversation was at least free from pose.

Now she strains to raise the conversation to rare and bleak levels. Say that Mrs. So and So has turned out to be a cross-grained old hag and Agatha has the answer. First she makes a grimace to indicate her displeasure. Then she murmurs, "Some women yield so easily to advancing years."

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Agatha then wangles the talk around to a discussion on methods of "deferring old age." She tosses in a few remarks about cosmetics, about some new pseudoscientific book. Before you realize it, you're knee-deep in chatter about women in general, what Schopenhauer said about them, their economic position in modern times, their future. And all this because you said Mrs. So and So is a cross-grained old hag.

If you say that Emma has a new string of pearls, Agatha translates it into "why women wear jewels." Someone's hankering after peanut butter leads, with her zeal for refined abstractions, into "nourishing foods."

Since she heard the "compliment" three years ago, it is doubtful if she has talked about herself a dozen times. This seems to be carrying self-control too far.

Reducing a juicy bit of gossip to vague generalities is like pouring buttermilk into a Manhattan cocktail.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THREE SPADES AND BACH FUGUES

AT CERTAIN TIMES THERE SHOULD BE NO CONVERSATION AT all.

Everyone will concur in this but not everyone will accept it as a guide to behavior. Many fluent conversationalists evidently believe at the bottom of their hearts that the occasion never existed that could not be improved with a little bright chatter.

Let us name a few occasions when bright chatter is a scourge to the listener:

People in pain or grief often crave silence. People in a variety of other states often crave silence. When people show no inclination to talk, whatever the reason, their wishes should be respected. From these occasions, that are not always predictable, let us continue with some that are:

At bridge games. The game doesn't require that the players keep still. But it does require that the talk be confined to casual remarks. Sustained conversation of all kinds, particularly anecdotes, are a nuisance. Women are prone to this sort of thing:

"Did I tell you I ran into Halliday? . . . Well, I did. . . . Who dealt? . . . He had an awful tale of woe . . . it

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

seems his mother-in-law . . . oh, sorry! I didn't realize you were waiting for me . . . two clubs . . . his mother-in-law is giving away . . . can I review the bidding . . . well, I'll say three spades . . . she's giving away all her money to Negro charities . . . my lead . . . in the south . . ."

This is neither bridge nor conversation. Those who can't keep still at bridge or any other game requiring concentration should withdraw.

On commuting trains. Ask any commuter to define a bore and he will reply, "People who want to talk to me when I want to read the paper. It's the only hour I get for reading the whole day. And there are always buzzards cruising up and down the aisles looking for victims."

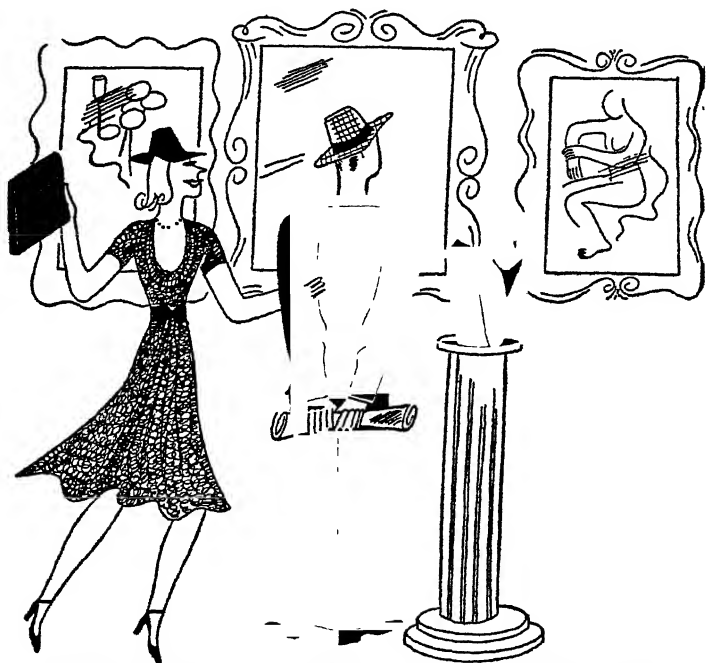
In art galleries. Occasionally yes (when it's about the exhibits, when you know what you're talking about and the others look as if they want to hear you) but mostly no. Babbling destroys anyone's response to a work of art.

In reading rooms. Many conversationalists become suddenly inspired when they see a roomful of silent, absorbed people. They ought to buy themselves a bag of gumdrops equipped with Maxim silencers. Incidentally, the sight of a person reading a book in a park, at home, anywhere, seems to provide a challenge to the garrulous. Chatty wives are often inspired to eloquence by the sight of their husbands looking content with a page of printed matter.

At the theater, the opera, the movies. Why do people pay good money to chatter in the dark when they might

THREE SPADES AND BACH FUGUES

do it with the lights on at home? Whatever the answer, theater gabblers are among the most trying barbarians left in the world.



Babbling destroys anyone's response to a work of art.

At concerts. Concert gabblers deserve special treatment. They are far more noxious than the gabblers who infest plays, operas, movies. Since the stage holds visual as well as vocal entertainment, the eye can absorb something while the ear is occupied with a chatterbox. But concerts require

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

the undivided attention of the ears. To get pleasure out of a concert, the listener must be relaxed, free to concentrate on sound, safe from interruption. He pays for the privilege. This amounts to saying that the person who cannot keep still at concerts deprives others of their rights.

No soloist or symphony concert ever set out to provide an obligato for babblers. Their best efforts demand silence.

Why do people talk at concerts? Are they bored? If so, why don't they stay at home and save money? Are they the victims of faulty glands? Why not spend the money on a doctor? Are they by any chance habitually silent people who require some particular stimulus such as a Bach fugue to bring them out? Finding the answers to these questions would require sustained research. Some student ought to use the subject for a thesis.

Have you ever wondered what people whisper *about* at concerts? What subjects, what specific observations are so important that they cannot be deferred to the intermission? What sudden discoveries justify the buzz-buzz that disturbs the paying customers on every side? Here are six authentic, whispered remarks that spoiled great moments for scores of people. They are an eloquent commentary on concert gabblers:

1. "That coughing is annoying." Made by fat woman to another fat woman while Lotte Lehmann was singing "Allerseelen."

2. "What was that you said about Katie's hat?" Made

THREE SPADES AND BACH FUGUES

by college boy to his girl while Toscanini was giving the signal to the chorus in Beethoven's Ninth.

3. "I just happened to think . . . that man's name was Bertie." Made by horn-rimmed young man of type caricaturists call "intellectual" to young woman of same type while Marian Anderson was singing Schubert's "Ave Maria."

4. "I wished we'd bought the salted pecans, these things are too rich." Made by dowager who had studied pictures of Queen Mary's hats to another dowager still living under Clara Bow influence, while Artur Schnabel was getting into the second movement of Beethoven's Opus 53.

5. "It started off like 'The Isle of Capri.'" Made by man with ear trumpet addressing the first fifteen rows while Kreisler was playing Paganini's 24th Caprice.

6. "Listen, is my face red?" Made by pretty girl to another pretty girl while Wanda Landowska was playing the larghetto movement of Mozart's D-Major Concerto.

Listening to these thrilling revelations what would you say about concert conversationalists? "Thoughtless" might be the word if you are excessively charitable. If you go in for more accurate diagnosis you might experience some difficulty in picking between "oafs," "louts" and "boors."

Are there *no* occasions when one is justified in speaking up at a concert? Yes, let us be fair. There are such occasions. When the remark is of vital importance, when deferring it would spoil the effect. For instance:

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

"I just happened to remember I put Junior in the oven and turned on the gas."

"Will you marry me?"

"I forgot to tell you the police want you to drop into the Morgue. They've got a new stiff they think may be your Aunt Clementine."

"That man back of me just pinched my pocketbook."

"Did I tell you the lottery people called up to say you won the Irish sweepstakes?"

If you find anything as urgent as these remarks coming into your head at a concert, by all means whisper or even shout. Otherwise, silence. Absolute silence!

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE ART OF SAYING GOOD-BY

A FRENCH MARQUISE IN THE REIGN OF LOUIS XVI WAS CONSIDERED a great authority on the art of entering a room. Asked for her secret she replied, "I enter every room as if I owned it."

Contemporary authorities on entering a room are more reticent about divulging their secrets but many of the socially successful believe, if one may judge from their behavior, that the proper way to arrive at a dinner or party is to storm in as if they intended to demolish the piano with a machete.

Through the ages a great deal has been spoken and written on the art of entering a room—how to produce a good first impression. It is a pity that more attention has not been paid to the art of leaving a room. It is the last impression that counts.

Playwrights and novelists spend as much time thinking up appropriate exits as entrances. Characters that hang on too long ruin plays and novels. Shakespeare was so eager to get them off the stage that he sometimes used poisons and daggers. Modern craftsmen are more deft. Guy de Maupassant, for example, could polish them off in one

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

smashing sentence. Virginia Woolf killed off one character in a parenthesis.

Characters in real life, however, think only of entrances. They rarely know when to speak the last line and make for the door.

Agnes Repplier has a story in one of her essays about a girl who put on her hat, buttoned her coat, put her hands in her muff, took them out, picked up a parcel, laid it down, shifted from one foot to the other and then said, "There was something I meant to say but I've forgotten."

Miss Repplier replied, "Perhaps, my dear, it was good-by."

We all of us have wished at times we had the courage to say the same.

Rare is the man, rarer the woman, who doesn't understand the art of effective entrances. Some enter as the marquise did. Some (particularly those making the rounds of cocktail parties) rush in as if they were being pursued by a three-toed sloth bear. Others sidle in, slither in, mope in. Once established, they relax. They soak up drinks. They splash the air with anecdotes. Never a thought do they give to the all-important business of getting out. Rare is the man, rarer the woman, who does not act as if the threshold were covered with tanglefoot.

Business executives deal with the problem in summary fashion. Once the interview is over and a visitor lingers, the business executive rises, moves toward the door. Into the executive eyes, glittering a few moments before with interest and admiration, comes a dull, brooding look. If

THE ART OF SAYING GOOD-BY

the visitor doesn't step on the starter, telephones and buzzers shatter the air. In thirty seconds a handsome secretary breaks in, "Mr. Chuckle-Muckle, sorry to disturb you but Mr. O'Moriarity is calling from San Francisco. I put it in the outside booth."

Transferring the machinery for this sort of thing from office to home would present stupendous problems. The average guest finds life easier at social affairs.

When the time comes to say good-by the average guest does something like this: He announces halfheartedly, "Well, I must be going." No one pays any attention. The guest doesn't stir. At the next pause in the conversation he says, developing signs of firmness, "Really, I must be going." The pause lengthens and the speaker slides toward the front of the chair.

But this is only the beginning. Intermittently the conversation is broken up with, "Oh, really, I can't stay another minute." At length the other guests realize that someone is leaving. They stop talking. The departing guest rises, shakes hands, makes individual speeches of farewell—"So long, Tommy, nice to see you again." . . . "Don't forget, Hortense, Thursday under the big clock, five o'clock." He then assures the host several times it has been a big success. He moves slowly toward the door.

If the house is big and the host skillful, this is the end for the departing guest. He feels a friendly arm, he is piloted toward staircase or elevator. The stay-ons breathe a sigh of relief and resume the conversation.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

But most houses and apartments in this era are, unfortunately, small. The departure can be prolonged indefinitely while the guest puts on clothes, loses and recovers a muffler and, in the case of women, applies make-up. Fifteen minutes is a conservative estimate for this stage of saying good-by.

Just why visitors get wound up when they reach the door is a matter we shall leave to the psychiatrists. Let us confine ourselves to this observation: conversation that begins with farewell speeches is more inept than a letter that drools off into postscripts. The time to get things said is when one is a member of the party—not when the nooby and fascinator have been tied and the host is shifting from one foot to the other.

Something happens to our motor responses when a visitor says he is leaving. No matter how pleasant the visit, how we wish it might have been prolonged, our nerves shift gears when the word “go” is mentioned.

Conversation is suspended while a guest is preparing to depart. Prolonged good-bys destroy all continuity in the talk. The host is obliged to let the rest of the guests go hang while he is occupied with the good-by sayer. Sometimes he is forced to stand in a blast from the open door while the guest, clothed for the outside, rakes up a few more anecdotes.

Mention of the word “go” should be followed by a reasonably speedy passage to the door.

Those who achieve the reasonably speedy passage and

THE ART OF SAYING GOOD-BY

then remain on the threshold for twenty minutes adding footnotes to the conversation ought to send their self-starters to the garage for repairs.

The art of saying good-by is so wantonly neglected that all schools should place it in the curriculum even if it means sacrificing raffia-weaving or egg-boiling.

Getting in is easy but getting out requires finesse. Ask any chipmunk.

CASE HISTORY A

Mrs. McQ is, at sixty, one of the most gifted good-by sayers now extant on the planet. She has plenty of chance to perform, too, because her 250 pounds don't stop her from being an indomitable party girl.

One of her best performances took place at a reception given in the Ritz in Paris by a famous opera singer. Mrs. McQ flounced in with the air of an elephant that had just felt the first touch of spring in the air. Her spectacular entrance was aided by a rich booming voice and a bizarre dress, compounded of two parts lace, one part chiffon and one part ostrich feathers. Down the front there was a splash of sequins and brilliants as if the big diamond pin on her bosom had sprung a leak.

Her arms were laden with handbag, umbrella, lorgnette and packages. "I've just been shopping," she said. Rich enough to hire an army of stevedores, she insisted on carrying the packages herself.

The opera singer, her butler and a check-room flunky arrived on the hop. It took the three of them to divest Mrs. McQ of her packages. For fifteen minutes she behaved

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

herself. Then she sent for the check-room flunky and said to the hostess, "You'll have to excuse me, I never stay at receptions more than twenty minutes."

It seemed set point. Then Mrs. McQ broke loose. Suddenly, explosively, without warning or provocation she broke into a Bach fugue monologue—four levels of monologue all at once.

"Next time I see you I must tell you about the ghastly scandal . . . that silly little countess, what's her name . . . here, here! hand me the gloves last . . . the big box first . . . *mon Dieu*, what a clod! . . . the big box has the handkerchiefs . . . the most ridiculous bargains at the Galeries Lafayette . . . oh, how are you, Señor . . . oh, you precious scalawag! . . . funny I didn't see you before, say by the way who is that creature over there that looks like a giraffe? . . . no, the one eating the pickle . . . who? . . . that reminds me I heard today why Queen Wallie didn't go to the gala . . . course, she looks like a giraffe! . . . I always say that all people look like some kind of animal . . . giraffes, pumas . . . cougars, everything . . . *non, non, les gants après!* . . . *what* scandal? . . . oh yes, tell me her name and I'll tell you the rest. Where's the señor? . . . I had a few things to tell . . . oh, there you are, you rascal! . . . about the Germans in Cadiz. Don't lie to me! . . . course, I'm antifascist but what's that got to do with it . . . ?"

It sounded insane, this contrapuntal monologue, but it really had a complicated and integrated design. Those who listened carefully saw that the sentences in the fugue led, eventually, to a definite finale. They heard about the scandal, the bargains in the shops, the gala, the Germans in Cadiz.



"I never stay at receptions more than twenty minutes."

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

This had taken twenty minutes. "Am I still here? And to think I just dropped in for twenty minutes. I *must* go."

Another story occurred to her. She leaned over the back of a chair. At this moment she observed that sandwiches were floating about. She made a lunge at a tray, took a bite and boomed, "Cucumbers! The person who thought of putting cucumbers in sandwiches should be shot. Give me one of those. They're better. Yes, one more cocktail. I never stay at receptions more than twenty minutes."

Half an hour later they got her to the door. The hostess, detained on the threshold for fifteen minutes more, came back looking as if she had just opened up her first-of-the-month mail.

Mrs. McQ flits from country to country, from capital to capital, giving these performances. Once, in New York, she began her farewells at seven and drove off in a taxi at ten. "Her farewells," said the catty hostess, "are as long as Sarah Bernhardt's."

CASE HISTORY B

Allison V, 27, advertising copy writer, is runner-up to Mrs. McQ as good-by sayer. Thin and tall, he enters a room as furtively as a weasel. He flattens himself out against the first chair he sees and looks gloomily preoccupied. He looks, to be accurate about it, as dejected as a sandman in a night club.

At an after-dinner gathering of eight or ten people, he sat silent for two hours. Then he rose and said in a loud, aggressive tone, "I'll have to go."

The other guests who evidently hadn't noticed him looked as startled as if the coffee table had spoken up to say it was going back to Grand Rapids.

THE ART OF SAYING GOOD-BY

Midway between chair and door Allison paused. "I was just reminded when you were all talking about Hitler . . ." A friend of his had just returned from Germany and it took Allison ten minutes to relay the friend's story to a group that had long since abandoned Hitler for a more cheerful topic.

"I'll cure him of that," the host said afterward. "He never talks till he gets to the door. Then he makes speeches."

Next time Allison remained silent for two hours and again started orating at the door, the host led him back to his chair, insisted he remove his coat. Without the stimulus of coat and open door, he faltered and fell into silence. Nothing could loosen his tongue, it appeared, but the excitement of getting away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MOTH-BALL VOCABULARY

IT'S SO STIMULATING," SHE SAID, STANDING IN THE MIDDLE of the floor, indicating a painting with the handle of her umbrella. "Most stimulating indeed."

Those around her nodded solemn assent. A person who didn't know English would have assumed that final judgment on the canvas had been pronounced. She cut quite a figure. Her manner was easy and self-possessed, her accent was good, her clothes came from someone who knew what to do for women of her age and size.

But her vocabulary smelled of camphor and moth balls. What did she mean by saying the painting was "stimulating"? Did it affect her like a dill pickle held before the nose? Was she thinking of the gadgets the hairdressers rubbed over her scalp that morning? None of her listeners could have said exactly what she meant by the word. Doubtless she didn't know herself. She had a flock of such words, cut and dried for all occasions. They saved her from thinking.

The word "stimulating" has had a long and on the whole an honorable role in the English language. But shortly before the war it was adopted by "the smart set." In one

MOTH-BALL VOCABULARY

hour it was snatched from its quiet niche in the dictionary to become a shining synonym for brilliant, clever, attractive, pleasing and then fair, tolerable and so-so. It was *the* word of the day. Preachers, lecturers, actors, journalists and the boys working their way through college by selling magazine subscriptions found everything "stimulating." The laity found itself stimulated by books, pictures, hailstorms, lemon pies and balky billy goats.

The word was mauled around until it lost its sheen and its plumage. Finally, a battered old wreck, bereft of all color and character, it crawled back into the dictionary and no one in the year 1939 except a dowager trying to describe a painting would have the heart to drag it out.

Other words have had the same fate as "stimulating." In the years before the war severe maulings were meted out to "comprehensive," "cute," "cunning" and "ghastly." The war brought hundreds of new word casualties including the famous "camouflage," borrowed from France and returned to the French Academy in a shattered condition. The big word of 1919 was "intriguing" (in the sense of "interesting"). A few years later "gesture" was relieved of its normal functions and assigned to heavy duty in such sentences as "Well, between you and I and the gatepost I think she could of at least made a gesture."

At one time or another we have mistreated "psychological moment," "dynamic," "significant" and "exciting." Right now we are doing some pretty morbid things to "allergic."

We have no time in a book on conversation to tell the

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

strange things that have happened to decent, honest words, how they have been debased, mutilated, caricatured, how many have died after a good pummeling. You will find the dead words in the dictionary marked "obs." It might stand equally for "obsolete" and "obsequies." Dead words should be left in the morgue. Overworked words should be given a chance to recuperate.

Words and syntax have entered very slightly into our discussion of conversation. The reason has already been explained. A speaker's manner and what he has to say count for more than the actual mechanics of expression. Some of the best conversationalists mangle the English language. Some of those who use it with finicking precision are arch bores.

But there are many ways of mangling the English language, and using vogue words is one of the most lamentable. Why? Because ready-made labels don't express a speaker's thoughts. They are only substitutes for more expressive words the speaker wouldn't take the trouble to fish out of his vocabulary. Vogue words fill up silences but do not create communication between people. If I say, "I am allergic to drafts," I give only an approximate idea of what's in my mind. "Drafts give me colds" is more definite. If I can't stand plain speech I can say, "Every time I sit in a draft I feel as if a potato bug were running up and down my spine."

People with some education are the biggest customers for vogue words. The illiterate don't seem to hear all the

MOTH-BALL VOCABULARY

smart patter, so they express themselves in cruder but quite effective speech.

The use of vogue words when they are actually in vogue indicates a lazy, foggy mind. Using them when their vogue has passed puts a date on the lazy, foggy mind. Fumes of camphor and moth balls get into the conversation.

While we are on the subject of words and their abuse we might point out that vogue words are not the only way we can make our conversation colorless or conspicuous in the wrong way. Most of us have stored away in our attics a collection of trite expressions that belong in the trash bin. We have genteel phrases, overstuffed sentences, shopworn quotations and silly errors. We can hardly point out too often that one of the purposes of conversation is to express our own personality. Using someone else's outmoded and incorrect phrases does not help matters along. Not to be too vague about the matter, here are a few samples (let everyone look into his own attic) of the sort of thing that would do well in the trash bin.

1. "Personally I think smallpox is a horrible disease."

Why *personally*? Does the speaker mean he wouldn't like to have smallpox himself but considers it suitable for Mr. Bogash or Mrs. Whortleberry?

"Personally I never eat lobster."

Officially he eats it every day?

The word "personally" in nine cases out of ten makes no sense. The word implies a comparison with "officially,"

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

"speaking for my family" or something of the sort. Where no comparison is implied the word should be shunned.

2. "I was literally dead before the day was over."

Since the speaker is alive at the end of the arduous day, one assumes he means "figuratively," not "literally."

3. "He was clever to the nth degree."

If the speaker means "to an unknown degree," "to an undetermined degree," the expression will hold. But most people use it incorrectly to mean "to the highest degree."

4. "Like Topsy she just growed."

Is this the most common and tiresome quotation in the English language? Or is it, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever"? Whatever the answer, they're both so mildewed that the League of Nations ought to take sanctions against them. (It would be fun hearing about sanctions again.)

5. "I perspire so terribly."

Why not "sweat"? It is difficult to find an excuse for such genteelisms as perspire, expectorate, retire (for go to bed), attack (for rape), stomach (for belly). Americans who like euphemisms had better make up their minds that they cannot hope to compete with the English who are out in front with such fancy inventions as "lady help," "paying guests," "serviette," "ladies' cloak room."

6. "Just a nominal sum."

It has no sense when used for "a very small sum," "an infinitesimal sum."

7. "She's a comparatively attractive girl."

Compared with what? Horses, alligators? Or compared



*I am about to sack my Lithuanian cook for putting paprika
in the lemon pie.*

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

with other girls. If the last, why not, "she's a rather attractive girl"?

8. "The exception proves the rule."

Someone says all Lithuanians are good cooks. I am about to sack my Lithuanian cook for putting paprika in the lemon pie for the fifth time. Does the exception prove the rule? It does nothing of the sort. It challenges the rule. If I can produce a few more examples of Lithuanian aberrations in the kitchen I'll prove there is no rule.

Day after day this lunatic expression is heard in ordinary conversation. It usually proves the contrary of what the speaker intends.

The original sense of "prove" in English was "test." So, the exception *tests* the rule.

9. "Are you going back to the States?"

Why on earth do Americans, once beyond the three-mile limit, acquire a mad desire to refer to their country as "the States"? If the people of other countries like the expression that is their privilege. But on the lips of Americans it sounds silly—as silly as "Britishers" would sound on the lips of Englishmen if they ever condescended to use our word for them.

Americans who have traveled much or lived abroad never say "the States." It is the exclusive property of those who have just broken loose and are trying to acquire a little cosmopolitan patter.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MORTAL SINS

1. "So THEN Groucho walked in with the duck—it was perfectly screaming. But in the meanwhile, Harpo had been talking to the Armenian rug salesman."

There must be a special compartment in hell for people who relate the plots of movies, plays, novels.

2. "You tell it, Angela."

"No, you tell it so much better."

"No, it's your story and you tell it."

"But I've forgotten the details and . . ."

Husbands and wives are particularly addicted to this sort of performance. If they think their dispute is a good curtain-raiser, they're wrong. By the time Angela gets around to telling it, everyone in the audience is yearning to send them spinning out the front door.

Some husbands and wives are unable to get off five remarks without collaboration—"It was five dollars he paid for it, wasn't it, dear?" . . . "No, wait a minute, honey, you're getting that mixed up." For most of us, tandem anecdotes are an ordeal. Husbands and wives ought to perform singly.*

3. "My life would make a book."

* In public, that is.

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Well, why not write it?

4. "She's my best friend and I wouldn't say a word against her but . . ."

And then starts the music. People addicted to these dangling little *buts* give themselves away before they've begun. The tight-lipped dowager who sits in the corner saying, "Of course, I'm broad-minded but . . ." and the well-fed businessman who says, "I'm not denying Roosevelt has done good things but . . ." don't fool anyone.

5. "Escargots—snails to you, dearie."

This was probably very funny the first time it was uttered.

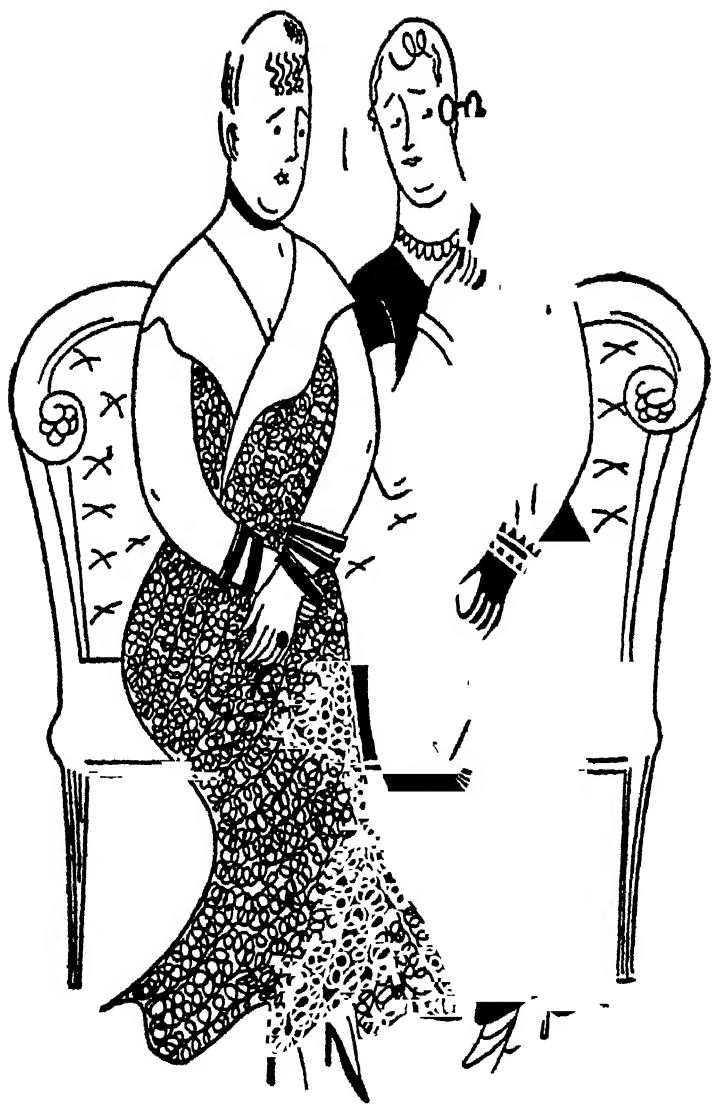
6. "Dick, Dick, look at the woman in the pink hat."

Fidgety women are often guilty of an offense that consists in whispering their way into conversations. Instead of waiting their turn and breaking in boldly, they cultivate minor distractions. When they divert Dick's attention from the conversation they whisper to someone else. And so on till there is no conversation. The speaker ought to stop and bellow: "Not only Dick but the rest of us will take two minutes out to look at the woman in the pink hat."

7. "Do you get the point?"

There's only one proper reply to people who say, "Do you get the point?" "Do you follow?" "Sure you understand what I mean?" It is: "I doubt if there is any point but in any case I don't follow and of course I don't understand."

8. "How high did you say the Washington Monument is?"



"Of course, I'm broad-minded but ..."

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

Baiters are always on the alert to correct little errors of fact, particularly when the error has no importance in the conversation. If you say, "It was something like the Vilma Strunk murder," they'll remind you it was the Zelma Strunk murder. If you say "Dickens' *Henry Esmond*," the baiters will set you right although everyone present, including yourself, knows who wrote *Henry Esmond*. It was no error of fact but a slip of the tongue. Baiters are usually encyclopedias of misinformation.

If the baiters survive the poison cup they usually become arguers. Genuine arguers indulge in the sport for its own sake and they are usually equipped to take either side of a question. A man's intelligence can usually be judged in inverse ratio to his capacity for argumentation.

9. "I put my hand in my pocket and took out a . . ."
"A penknife!"

It wasn't a penknife at all, Mrs. Clucker. I have half a mind to strangle you for finishing up my sentences for me. This is an old habit of yours. When your husband tells a joke you rush in just before the end with your own tag line and all the guests blink because the joke is ruined. When your guests talk you try to snatch their words out of their mouths. Everything gets boggled up. Why do you do it? Are you afraid the speaker will have a lapse of memory before he gets to the end? Do you feel you know his mind better than he does? Could you be induced to carry on your favorite pastime in private? Get yourself a volume of

MORTAL SINS

Wordsworth's sonnets. Try changing the last word in every line.

10. "My cooking is simply hopeless."

"Well, you said it!"

Two simple sentences like this have resulted in many a ruptured friendship. There may be no flare-up, the evidence of annoyance may be well-concealed. But the sting remains and presently some more plausible excuse comes up for starting a row.

Anyone who deprecates himself has, of course, no excuse for objecting when another agrees with him. Those who don't want to be insulted should not leave openings.

At the same time the author of the second sentence might have contemplated one of the basic facts of human vanity: self-depreciation does not seek corroboration.

11. "Is that the doorbell?"

Some people have a gift for hearing imaginary doorbells, noises in the cellar, etc., when others are talking. The same people usually find a multitude of other excuses for interrupting. The least they can do is to say, as they settle down again, "Now before I interrupted you, you were saying that Mabel tickled her husband with a guinea-hen feather." Giving the speaker a chance to finish up after an interruption ought to be one of the elementary rules of conversation. If the interrupter neglects this, someone else ought to do it for him. Unless, of course, the speaker is a Grade A or Grade B bore.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VENIAL SINS

1. "Now what *was* that man's name? . . . wait a minute, it's right on the tip of my tongue."

If it's the name of the man who sells ten-dollar gold pieces for five dollars, everyone will listen patiently until it comes off the tongue into the air. But if it's the name of the man who sold a lopsided lollipop to Cousin Sylvester's boy three years ago come Michaelmas, the company will turn to thoughts of arsenic.

A finicky passion for details leads many a conversationalist, otherwise well-behaved, to stop at intervals and paw the air for names of people, heights of mountains, quotations from books, etc., none of them necessary to the story.

Those afflicted with this conversational tic ought to say, "The name escapes me now"—and go on. The rest of us will invent names and other immaterial data.

2. "So I got off the train and looked at the sign, if you know what I mean."

I know what you mean. I grasp the idea not only in its fundamental details but its subtlest implications: you got off the train and looked at the sign.

Under mortal sins we mentioned the fellow who is fearful

VENIAL SINS

you don't know what he means because his ideas might tax your intelligence. Here, under venial sins, we refer to the nervous talker who uses the phrase as a breather allowing him to collect his thoughts. There is nothing much to do about it except to utter a silent prayer to Yahveh that nervous talkers will stop saying, "You know what I mean."

3. "What? . . . the Encyclopedia . . . you know, of course, what Aldous Huxley said. . . ."

When Aldous Huxley in an ill-advised moment told his readers he was in the habit of taking a volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica along on trips and had a howling time, he provided several hundred conversationalists with their favorite allusion and anecdote. No remark since Aristotle's notion about "catharsis" has so caught popular fancy, it would seem.

If this story were an isolated incident, it wouldn't be listed under venial sins. It becomes a sin through repetition. Many people pick up one little tidbit of this type and repeat it scores of times till all their friends are heartily sick of it.

4. "Wasn't that little man in the tea shop funny . . . and do you remember the old castle just outside Edinburgh?"

Friends like to recapitulate the incidents of pleasant, eventful days spent together. Very well, let them do it; it's an accepted form of indoor sport. But not in front of others who were not present and don't give a hoot in hell for the little man in the tea shop or the castle near Edin-

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

burgh. These cozy reminiscences that exclude the outsider are downright rude.

5. "Now this one will slay you."

Overselling a joke is bad tactics. The listeners subconsciously resent having their reaction dictated in advance. The result is thin laughter.

6. "Words simply cannot describe it."

Chances are, words *can* describe it. You can do wonderful things with words. Look at Shakespeare. Look at Kathleen Norris.

Let us suppose, however, that you have something too subtle for words. Try putting it into a symphonic poem for oboes and bassoons or else cackle like a hen using an egg beater obbligato. But for the love of God, don't put it into conversation!

7. "Of course you know the story about the parrot that hiccoughed."

Well, if I know it, why do you insist on telling it to me?

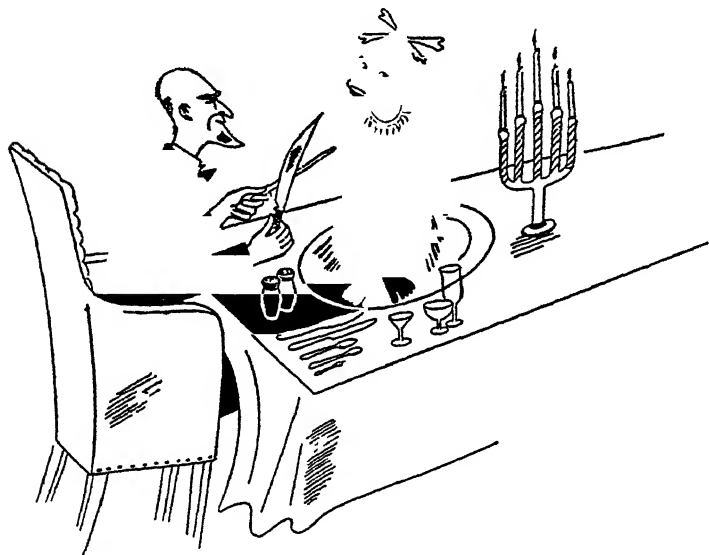
8. "Funnily enough the clothesline came down."

The author of this sentence must have repeated "funnily" sixty times a day. It was her pet word. People with pet words shake them around like dogs with a bone. With one it is "divine," with another "disquieting." The more ambitious sling around "intransigent" and "ideology." Those addicted to this practice of using one word constantly seem to weave their thoughts in patterns that will

VENIAL SINS

permit use of the word. Dogs sometimes bury their bones. Would that people with pet words would do likewise!

An aggravated case: An actress discovered "weird." She used it at first for "striking" or "unusual."—"What a



The spectacle of George Bernard Shaw eating a cannibal . . .

weird hat," "They invite such weird people to their parties." Now she carries on with, "Oh, you wouldn't say she was exactly weird but attractive enough" . . . "I didn't have a weird time at all . . . I was bored."

9. "I'm not boring you, am I?"

What does the speaker expect? What would he do if

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

he got a truthful answer? The very suspicion that one is boring another ought to freeze the tongue.

But sometimes a speaker will say, "I'm not boring you, am I?" when he knows very well he's interesting everyone in earshot. The reason is nervousness, or a mistaken idea of making a dramatic pause.

It provides a second good reason for not asking people if you are boring them. In every company there are anemic creatures waiting for the opportunity to be bored. The very word "boring" makes them yawn with satisfaction. They are the kind who would be bored by the spectacle of George Bernard Shaw eating a cannibal.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TARNISHED GOLD

THE AVERAGE MAN HAS HEARD ONE THING SAID ABOUT CON-
versation that he likes to repeat at the slightest provoca-
tion. It is this: "Conversation is a dead art."

This is nonsense, twaddle and balderdash. Not one of the thousands who parrot this remark has ever brought up any evidence to support it.

The idea that conversation is a dead art is not peculiar to our era. Men of all eras have damned their contemporaries and glorified the conversation of their predecessors on the planet. The Greeks envied the Egyptians. The Romans envied the Greeks. Epictetus, for instance, felt sure that the conversation of his age—the age of Nero—had gone to the dogs. He found many Romans to agree with him.

Swift thought he had fallen on a barren era and he liked to think about the age of Charles I. French royalists were certain that the Revolution had destroyed conversation as an art. One could multiply the examples endlessly.

But looking back today we should ask ourselves: if conversation is dead, when was it alive? Can any man who deprecates the conversation of today produce proof that it

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

was once better? Many, of course, have tried to do so. Many a book has raced along blithely for hundreds of pages showing how conversation flourished in this or that "golden age." Often it makes interesting reading. But on close inspection one sees that the books are less about conversation than about literature, public discourse, wit, humor, social customs. And these are not conversation.

As a matter of fact we possess very little accurate information about the earlier "golden ages of conversation." We have no idea how the Egyptians talked, and attempts to recreate Egyptian conversation from a few scattered remarks of Ptah Hotep are pedantry, pure and simple.

We know a great deal about Greek drama, poetry, history and philosophy but we have only sketchy ideas of Greek conversation. The various discourses and dialogues that have survived do not classify as real conversation. In any case they convey no hint that the quality of the talk was particularly high. The words of Socrates are often used to show how dazzling was conversation in Athens and how dull, in comparison, is the conversation of Duluth, Minnesota, or Wichita, Kansas. But taken as conversation, some of Socrates' verbal meanderings sound like a cantankerous, argumentative garage hand who has just got hold of Robert Ingersoll.

How the Romans disported themselves in conversation is another mystery. We have seen that Epictetus, the alien, thought that conversation in the reign of Nero was pretty thin stuff. We might be willing to take his word for it, if

TARNISHED GOLD

he hadn't let the cat out of the bag. The cat came out in one of his famous counsels: "Take care not to provoke laughter for this is a slippery way toward vulgar habits and it is also adapted to diminish the respect of your neighbor."

It seems not unlikely, then, that Epictetus thought there was too much levity in Neronian conversation. Perhaps there was. But this remark of the philosopher's suggests, somehow, that his own conversation was a bit on the grim side. Reading his words must have been a lot more fun than spending an evening in his company.

Some of the authors of fanciful books on conversation believe that conversation languished in the Dark Ages and then came to life with a bang during the Renaissance. To this we can only reply: this is an interesting opinion but show us proof.

It does not prove the point to say that the men of the Dark Ages were held down by penury, hardship, discomfort, superstition. No age has a monopoly on these commodities and conversation seems to flourish in spite of them. And it proves no more to say that because the Renaissance was a period of brilliant achievement in the arts and humanities, that it was high in conversation. The only way to prove that conversation was brilliant in some particular era is to show samples of it.

We do possess samples of two "golden ages of conversation," so let us look at them.

The French salons of the seventeenth and eighteenth

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

centuries have come to be a symbol of good conversation. Gossipy chroniclers have created in our minds pictures of such leaders as Mme. du Deffand, Mme. Geoffrin, Mme. de Tencin, Mme. d'Épinay and Mlle. de Lespinasse waving their wands and evoking glorious floods of talk. We see the women in their billowing gowns, the men in powdered wigs, sitting in the light of many candles. We hear voices raised in polished, witty discourse. The forms of Mme. de Sévigné, Condorcet, Voltaire, flit before our eyes.

The salons frowned on nookish little conversations between two people. They did not permit the guests to talk all at once as they do at modern cocktail parties. Everyone had to speak his mind out in the open. There is no denying, therefore, that the salons did some good.

But it was not all beer and skittles in the salons. The tone and tempo of the conversation were so well regulated by the leader that it took on the quality of a dress rehearsal. The speakers were judged like actors and if they failed to play their parts well they were banished. By the time Mlle. de Lespinasse arrived on the scene the salons had become formidable affairs and spontaneity had vanished. Conversation, a pretty simple pleasure, began to take on sacerdotal airs.

In dwelling on the brilliance of the salons, historians like to repeat some of the jokes. One of the most famous was made by Mme. Geoffrin when her guest asked her, "What happened to that little old man who used to sit at

TARNISHED GOLD

the end of the table and never say a word?" She replied, "That was my husband. He is dead."

More famous still is the crack of Mme. du Deffand when the guests were discussing the feat of Saint-Denis who, after being decapitated on Montmartre, simply picked up his head and walked four miles north to the town since named for him.

"Four miles with his head in his hands!" said the teller of the story.

"In matters of that sort," said Mme. du Deffand, "it is only the first step that comes hard."

Whether you laugh or whether you think of the one Mrs. Schlaumberger pulled when the butcher tried to sell her a duck for a goose, you will admit that a few jokes don't make a whole conversation.

The salons that developed conversation into a series of arranged monologues also developed another quality that was described by La Bruyère:

"When anything is said that is scarce understood, it is followed by something still more obscure. Then they improve on this by downright enigmas which are always followed by a long clapping of hands."

The salon idea is still not dead. Dark rumors creep up from time to time that they are flourishing in Moscow, London, New York, Oshkosh or What Cheer, Iowa. Whether they actually exist or whether it's a gross libel on these cities I have no idea.

But one thing is certain. Many a woman still harbors

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

the idea of forming a salon. The idea that conversation can be harnessed like water power seems to be an imperishable illusion. The would-be salon leaders maneuver their



"—just informal gatherings of interesting people."

victims into a corner and say in a purring tone, "Do come on Tuesday evening . . . we'll have some madrigals and *good* conversation. I'm planning something for every Tuesday evening—just informal gatherings of interesting people, artists, writers, etc."

Seventy-five per cent of the victims are tempted to say,

TARNISHED GOLD

"Just what makes you think, madam, that writers and artists are interesting people? And if you're hell-bent on reviving part of the past, why don't you restore something really useful, such as the ducking stool?"

Instead they say, "Sure, I'll be there." But when Tuesday comes all the "interesting people" are at the movies, at beer gardens or at home painting the kitchen sink. It looks as if we are pretty safe from the salon menace.

Another "golden age" of conversation began in the London coffee shops of Queen Anne's day and continued into the 1780's. This age was practically synonymous with Dr. Johnson. The ponderous, pontifical doctor worked out a system of monologues that would have floored even the customers of the French salons.

The idea was to get into the pulpit and stay there till the breath gave out. When the good doctor launched into one of those non-stop sentences of his beginning, "Well sir . . ." the listeners knew it would be several hours before the first intermission.

This sort of thing might have ended with Dr. Johnson's death if it hadn't been for Boswell whose fame lies in saddling posterity with a monumental bore.

The Johnsonian tradition lasted a long time in England. Coleridge took up the monologue idea and made many improvements. Whereas Dr. Johnson would permit an interruption if it gave him an excuse to continue on for another hour, Coleridge permitted none at all. It was understood in advance that everyone would keep still in his

CONVERSATION, PLEASE

presence. One of the few men who ever broke the rule was Charles Lamb. When Coleridge asked him, "Did you ever hear me preach?" Lamb sneaked in with seven words, "I never heard you do anything else."

Coleridge was equipped with a self-starter, a perfect motor and no brakes and windshield wiper.

The pace for succeeding decades was set by such prodigious talkers as Macaulay and Gladstone. Queen Victoria's comment on Gladstone's conversational tactics is eloquent indeed, because her own dear Albert was not behind the door when the tongues were given out. Victorian dinner tables were strewn with monstrous talkers.

Where the idea ever got started that quantity production makes good conversation it is difficult to say. Yet those who believe that conversation is a dead art hanker after the Johnsonian and Victorian eras quite as much as the artificial era of the salons.

About some "golden ages of conversation," as we have seen, we know nothing. About others we know too much. There is no sane reason for lament.

In repudiating the spurious claims of the past we need not exaggerate the merits of modern conversation. The main thing is that it suits our mental climate. All the laments for the past would probably cease if the lamenters could be sentenced to spend one day with the ghosts of Dr. Johnson and Mme. Geoffrin.

All complaints about today's conversation include remarks about "the machine age—the speed with which we

TARNISHED GOLD

live." But isn't quick tempo one of the attributes of good conversation? Isn't piecework another? When we come right down to it, are limited leisure and a limited set of activities any boon to conversation? The jagged rhythm of our talk today reflects the prevailing tension, to say nothing of our gluttonous appetite for amusement. If we were discussing economics or social customs we would find plenty to deplore, but as far as conversation goes, we have suffered no calamity. We have no time for instructive discourses or sermons disguised as conversation. But what harm? There is a tendency to be quick, brittle and pointed. But if we cease our ranting about "the lost art of conversation" on the one hand and "I'm just rushed off my feet" on the other, we will admit that there is plenty of time for saying everything worth saying.

Conversation would be better off, probably, if the word "art" were detached from it. Never will it conform to the principles that animate literature, music and the plastic arts. Every attempt to make it conform to such principles has ended in one of those self-conscious developments known as a "golden age." Such a label will certainly never be tacked on our era. This is all for the best. For happy conversations, like happy nations, leave no history.

THE END

